THE SKAZKA FAIRY TALES
A CINDERELLA RETELLING
THE GOLDEN SLIPPER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
VALIA LIND

THE GOLDEN SLIPPER

A CINDERELLA RETELLING

VALIA LIND

CONTENTS

Note from the Author

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33
Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Epilogue

Glossary of Russian words and phrases:
Kingdoms of Skazka
What more from the land of Skazka?
Don’t miss the Beauty and the Beast retelling!
Note from the Author
About the Author
Also by Valia Lind

Copyright © 2022 by Valia Lind

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover by Sanja Gombar

Map by Hanna Sandvig

Edited by Kay L. Moody

N
W
E
S
KOROLEVSTVO TSVETOV
TRADING PASSAGE
HOLODNOYE TSARSTVO
Rusalka Reka
ZELONOYE KOROLEVSTVO
Volshebnii Les
VOLKOVSKOYE KOROLEVSTVO
OCENIYE TSARSTVO
BABA YAGA
VODNOYE TSARSTVO
Ocean
Skazka

Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

When it was time for me to choose my next Russian fairytale retelling, I had no choice but to pick Cinderella. This one is my mama's favorite and something that we lived through, in many ways.

For those of you picking up my books for the first time, you will be interested to find out that I grew up in St. Petersburg, Russia. These fairytales, these stories, are my childhood. They were the first to teach me about magic and what it means to see the world a little differently.

This retelling is of the Cinderella you may be familiar with, as well as the Russian folk tale, Vasilisa The Beautiful. The two come together, fused with my own experiences and heritage, to bring you a romantic adventure.

This book contains brief scenes and references of abuse by a parental figure that some readers may find triggering.

I have included a glossary of Russian words and phrases at the back of the book for your convenience.

The variations in the Russian words' spellings come from the way the words' endings are changed in the Russian language. There will be a letter off every now and then, as it would be in the native tongue. I believe keeping the language as close to the original as possible brings that sense of "realness" to the experience.

I hope you love Mira and Luca as much as I do. I hope you enjoy the glimpses into the culture and the people of Skazka. I hope this book brings a little magic to your day. Thank you for reading.

Much love,
Valia

CHAPTER

ONE

MIRA

The day has hardly begun, and I already smell of cinders and morning dew. Sleeping by the fireplace and waking up to pick fresh berries before the sun fully comes over the horizon will do that to a person. My papa once told me that was how the magical forest smelled after a battle has been won. He and Mama would tell me stories of glorious adventures and strong, beautiful women—always making sure to tell me that's who I was growing up to be. I would laugh and strike a pose, like the mighty Queen Calista fighting Baba Yaga with her magic and her sword. Most of my childhood memories are flashes of Mama and me battling it out with practice swords and Papa teaching me to dance. Afterward, we would sit around the fire, singing and laughing.

Those are my favorite memories and part of the reason I still find comfort in being near the fire.

But that was a long time ago, and I no longer believe there is anything magical about smelling like the forest or imagining what life would be like if magic was on my side. I don't even believe in it anymore, not really. It's an afterthought in the back of my mind, not a dream I wish upon. It's pointless to keep my head lost in the clouds. I'm a planner. I set solid, attainable goals, and those are the only things I reach for.

The to-do list for today includes laundry—which is what I'm in the middle of at the moment—errands, pruning the garden, and dusting the frames around the house. I've been trying to finish off the last of the garments that must be hand-washed, hoping to be done before everyone wakes up.

No such luck.

"Miraslava, I swear you are completely incompetent." The shrill voice comes from behind me, and I turn slowly to meet the dark brown eyes of my stepmother. Feodora is the bane of my existence in every horrible way possible. Not that I would say so out loud. My parents taught me to hold my tongue until it is no longer appropriate to do so.

Today, she is adorned in her nearly blinding orange dress, which has a full skirt and enough ruffles to get lost in. She never wears the traditional *sarafan*, opting for more elaborate and large ensembles. Even though the embroidery and the multicolored design of a *sarafan* is flashy—a type of dress that's adorned with history and fashion—it's not flashy enough for Feodora. Her hair is long and blonde, much like mine, except mine is natural and is currently in a simple braid. My stepmother's hair is heavily dyed, probably with an enchanted lightening potion since buying dye from the human realm costs way too much. It is also curled and rests atop her head. I'm dressed in a simple brown dress with quarter-length sleeves and a wide neck. It's comfortable but boring enough that it doesn't stand out. I love it, though. It's almost soothing in a way that's a complete contrast to

everything my stepfamily wears. It's a hand-me-down, something of my mama's. It makes me feel closer to her, even after years apart. Plus, it's got pockets.

"Well, don't you have anything to say for yourself?"

I shake my head a little and continue to watch her blankly, keeping all my emotions tightly beneath the surface. When I speak, my voice is cool and calm.

"I am not sure what you are referring to."

"Don't sass me, Miraslava. You know well enough you were to have your sisters' dresses pressed and ready to go early this morning."

"The dresses are ready and waiting for them in the dressing room."

This was previously discussed, which is why I'm confused at her outburst, even though I'm used to it. She doesn't really need a reason to yell at me. She always finds one.

The girls, of course, are nowhere near ready. Agrippina has been trying on the fake glass jewelry for about an hour now. With the way my stepmother spends what little money we have, we can't afford buckets of the real stuff. And buckets are what Agrippina requires, apparently. Galina has been in there with her, bringing her each piece of jewelry one at a time. While Agrippina is as spoiled as her mother, Galina is a little harder to figure out. She seems almost nice at times. Although, most of the time it's hidden beneath layers of copying her older sister.

"Well, if the dresses are ready, as you say they are, then my girls should be wearing them already."

Taking a deep, controlled breath, I try to find the words to explain to her it's not my fault. No matter what I say, I'll be the one in trouble. But one thing will get me a scolding while the other will get me a physical punishment. I have to choose my words carefully. Feodora holds a lot of power over me, most of it concerning my freedom. Until I'm of a certain age—or earn enough money to petition the kingdom—she controls every move I make. One wrong word, and she'll sell me off to serve at another household. Then, I'll have no way of escape.

At least here, I have a way out. If I save enough money, I can buy passage to the human realm and never step foot in Skazka again. It's very convenient that we have a queen who lived in the human realm and therefore, keeps the trade with them open.

Back before our kingdom had a fair queen, there was a lot of turmoil. From the stories I've heard from those who've been there—people like to talk once they get enough food and drink in their bellies—the human realm isn't much better. While we have magic and dangerous creatures, they have science and inventions. Still chaos, but a different kind of chaos, and it's a place I want to go. The opportunities seem endless. I've always wanted to open my own flower shop, and it seems like the human realm could use a little beauty in it.

I'll have no problem blending in considering our kind and humans look the same. The difference comes in the form of magic we carry within ourselves. There's a tiny piece that connects us to the realm in a way a human isn't connected. Mama used to say it's a part of Skazka itself, a connection to the land that's unique to us. It's where rumors of people doing magic spreads, those in touch with their roots better than others. There are plenty of creatures living in the woods, away from the populated towns, that prove that conclusion. There are giant birds with the heads of women and even tree-like creatures who walk and talk like old men.

It's not that I don't believe magic exists. I think it's one of those grand things that doesn't affect me directly, so why spend time thinking about it? People love to exaggerate anyway. We common folk don't hold the type of magic the royal family does, especially not like Queen Calista.

The creatures in the woods that are straight out of Mama's storybooks are only that to me: stories.

I have yet to see one myself. The land beyond the portal is much more fascinating to me. It even seems more attainable somehow.

"You are insufferable," my stepmother says, snapping me back from my daydreams.

"If the girls are ready, I can come in and help them dress," I say, as my stepmother narrows her eyes at me. She hates my calm voice more than any other sound in the world. She'd much rather I fly off the handle like her daughters do. Then she'd have a reason to punish me. Not that she ever punishes them. Even when they're in the wrong, somehow I always get the brunt of it.

"You keep your dirty hands to yourself. You look like you slept inside the fire pit."

With that, she turns and storms back to the main house.

I watch her go, taking another deep, calming breath. She holds all my inheritance, all of the money coming in from the kingdom. Queen Calista tries to help families with only one parent, and I lost both of mine, so we get a little money coming in from that. But, I can do nothing without Feodora's permission.

For a land that is as advanced as ours—we have indoor plumbing, after all—some of the rules are quite arbitrary.

Nevertheless, I push on. I have no other choice.

My hand falls in the middle of my chest, the feel of the pendant I wear as a comfort underneath the clothes. It was a gift from my mama, and thankfully, Feodora has never seen it. I keep it tucked away. It's shaped like a *matreshka*, except it doesn't open. It has a red-painted scarf around the head, large blue eyes that seem to watch me, and a beautiful array of flowers for the dress. The wooden piece is nothing expensive, but it's been made with love. It was a gift to my mama, a blessing that she later bestowed on me. It's a grounding object, something that reminds me regularly that the life I so desperately want is right on the other side of this hardship.

Turning back to the pile of clothes I've been washing, I sigh. I heard some of the houses have washing machines, the fancy kind that come from the human realm. But there is no way my stepmother would spend that kind of money. She has me, after all.

I can't wait until my twenty-first birthday. Then, I'll be officially considered an adult and will no longer have to depend on Feodora. That's my best way out of this mundane life. Only slightly less than four years to go.

BACK WHEN MY PARENTS WERE ALIVE, MY DREAM WAS TO OPEN A FLOWER SHOP. I REMEMBER GLIMPSES of my mama and me walking through our garden as she pointed out various flower types and talked about their growing seasons. She loved plants, and they loved her back. Our house was filled with pots of vining green monstrosities and tall tree-like beauties. I think we had more plants in the house than any kind of art. And the outside was just as magnificent, blooming nearly all year long.

I was only seven when she died, still so young, but old enough to understand my life would never be the same.

Papa remarried right before my fifteenth birthday, and when he died a year later, the hole that opened up when I lost Mama became a whole canyon of grief. It's a pain I carry with me daily. Sometimes, I think it will swallow me whole, but then I remember that's not what they would've wanted for me. They always encouraged my ambition and dreams, and I owe it to them, as much as to

myself, to see those realized.

Pulling out my trusty little journal from the over-the-shoulder bag I carry, I write as I walk. There are seven different chores I need to make sure I finish after we return from going into town. I also make a note to check with our next-door neighbors to see if they need me to pick anything up for them when I do a grocery run this weekend. They live far enough away that we're a little isolated, and they seem to be gone a lot, but I check anyway.

Making lists calms me. Even though I know I'll remember what needs to be done, writing it all down is like putting a final stamp of approval on it. Now it's official, now I have accountability. It's something Mama taught me when we would go over the garden together. She documented every plant, when they were watered and fertilized and pruned. It always made me laugh how my mama was the more artistic one yet more organized. Papa was a salesman. He was the first to introduce me to the human realm. The queen allowed passage for some trade between the realms, and Papa was good with people, so he was one of the few who went. Yet, as good as he was with people, he couldn't keep his paperwork in order for anything. Not even bribes. Mama tried a time or two.

"Miss, hurry. They'll leave without you," Anna calls out as I rush through the kitchen. She's the only one who was kept on after Feodora let the staff go. Anna comes in once a week in the morning to cook for us, and I'm grateful. She's the only person left from before.

Before the debts.

Before my father died.

Before I was left alone in this world.

"Thank you!" I say, grabbing a few crackers and rushing after the carriage. It's already pulling away, so I jump onto the back of it, taking a seat on the little perch. From inside the carriage, Feodora looks at me through the window. She gives me a disgusted look before facing forward again.

She really is in a mood today, but it doesn't matter. Once we're in town, they'll be off pretending they can buy all the things they try on, and I'll be at Oksana's. Her ma was my mama's friend, and Oksana and I grew up together, even though she's a few years older than me. She is already of age and has opened up a bakery in town. Now, her family helps her run the business. I would be lying if I said Oksana doesn't make the best bread in this kingdom. She deserves every bit of her success, and I am so proud of her.

When we stop at the outskirts of town, Feodora and the girls step out of the carriage with a flourish. It's why they wear such ridiculous color combinations. Feodora's one rule is to be flashy enough to be noticed. They simply must be seen. I've overheard this conversation a time or two, when the money became tight, and Feodora had to justify her spendings. Her daughters can't find husbands if no one knows who they are. So the flashier, the better.

"Make sure you are at the square at two sharp," Feodora snaps at me before she turns away. She barely even looks in my direction, acknowledging me with her words but not her attention. This is a big reason why I'm not invited to shop with them. She doesn't want to be seen with the likes of me. Her words, of course. Agrippina mirrors her mother's eye roll, but Galina gives me a little wave before she hurries after the others. I chuckle to myself and turn in the opposite direction.

Zelenoye Korolevstvo has always been a lush and blooming kingdom. *Volshebnii Les* is the forest that borders us on every side and is rumored to be filled with unimaginable magic. Or so I'm told, of course.

The town itself is a mixture of old and new. Before Queen Calista took the throne, the kingdom was stuck in the dark ages. The way Papa used to tell it, everything was shrouded in this blanket of darkness and sadness. There was happiness, of course. He and Mama were happy. But there was

always the possibility of shadows on the other side of a sunrise. And there was no progress, no electricity, or even modern clothing. The houses were built entirely of wood with only a fireplace for light and heat in the dead of winter.

But then, twenty-five years ago, everything changed.

The tales of Queen Calista's triumphant victory over Baba Yaga and the Shadowlands are stories that have become their own fairytales. The fact that one woman could overcome darkness, without and within, and still find her perfect place in the world is the encouragement I cling to daily.

Since the human realm is no longer a secret, many of its advancements have traveled to these lands. We now have indoor plumbing and refrigeration. Some people still live entirely the classic way of living, with lanterns and cooling chests. Carriages are still the way of travel, although I have heard King Brendan has what is called a motorcycle. It's supposed to be really fast, and it runs on *benzin*, which is a form of fuel. I can't wait to see a motorcycle when I'm in the human realm.

As I hurry toward Oksana's bakery, I smile at the people I pass. Some of the women are dressed in the traditional *sarafan*. The reds and golds of the threads and the straight flowing lines are easily recognizable. However, some of the women are wearing pants and button-up or flowy blouses with darker, more muted colors. Most of the men are in slacks and work shirts. Seeing the blend of two worlds is all I've grown up with, and it makes me feel even more determined to stick with my plan.

"There you are, my bestest friend in the whole wide world…in this realm and the next!" Oksana greets me as I step into her bakery, and I narrow my eyes immediately.

"What do you need?" I ask.

She chuckles as she hands a paper bag over to the customer in front of her. Then, she walks around the counter and loops her arm through the crook of my elbow. She's a beautiful girl with sun-bleached brown hair, which she wears in a braid that she usually twists into a bun. Her eyes are amber, her lips full, and she's got rosy cheeks from the excitement.

"Why would I need something? Can't I just be happy to see you?"

"You can," I say slowly. "But you're not. Because I know you. There's a gleam in your eyes, as if you've planned some shenanigans." She chuckles again, and I give her a bright smile, knowing already that whatever she's cooked up, I'll be a willing participant.

"Well, it's not really a shenanigan, but more like a job?"

"Wait, what?" I pull her to a stop as we step inside the kitchen. Her ma is at the table, rearranging freshly baked rolls. Oksana is the spitting image of her ma, right down to the laughter lines around her eyes.

"Good morning, Tetia Rosa," I call out. The woman walks right over to give me a hug. I cling to her as tightly as she clings to me, before she takes a step back.

"You look more like your mama and papa every day," she says, cupping my cheek before giving it a little pinch. I can't help but smile at the love in her eyes, pushing past the sadness in my heart. This woman would've fought Feodora with everything she had to adopt me, if there was any chance Feodora would've let me go. But I am too valuable to my stepmother. After all, who else will run the house? Never mind that Feodora gets a special allowance for me from the kingdom. It's a gift of honor for my family, mostly my father. He was, after all, one of the chosen travelers to the human realm. He'd met the queen a time or two. The money is supposed to go toward me and my future, not that I will ever see a *ruble* of it. That is why I take every job I can find, under Feodora's nose.

Tetia Rosa moves back to the baking table, motioning for Oksana's younger sister to take the trays out. Lubov is the only blonde in their family, and I always know when she's around because there are dress sketches everywhere. She waves in my direction, and I wave back. Oksana then tugs me toward

the little area in the corner she calls her office. There's barely enough room for a table and chair, but she's got all kinds of recipes pinned to the wall and a ledger where she keeps track of all the expenses and earnings.

"You are awfully aggressive this morning," I comment, raising an eyebrow at her. She waves me off as she lets go of my arm and starts sorting through the papers on the table.

"Ah, here it is!" She thrusts a piece of paper at me, and I see the most beautiful border design of vines and flowers spreading all around the edges.

"Wow, how many flower variations are on that one vine?" I ask, pulling the paper closer.

"Mira, forget your flowers for two seconds and actually look at the words!"

I give Oksana another look, but I do turn my attention to the words.

"Queen Calista and King Brendan are cordially inviting the kingdom's people to an anniversary celebration to be held on the castle's grounds. Every single citizen of *Zelenovo Korolevstva* is invited to come," I read out loud. "The masquerade balls will be held on the first, third, and fifth day of the festival. Come adorned in your best attire."

I stop reading and glance up at my very excited friend.

"A celebration?"

"At the palace! With masquerade balls! And—" she pauses for dramatic effect.

"And?"

"And I got the catering gig for it!" She squeals.

"What?" I join her in the squealing, and we're clasping hands, and I can't believe this. To bake for the royal family? And the rest of the invited guests? It's incredible.

"Okay, so I'm not the only one," Oksana says after I have calmed down from the initial reaction. "But I am the main baker. Queen Calista has asked for all kinds of different cakes, and different types of bread, and oh my goodness, Mira! Can you believe it? The queen herself wants me there!"

"Oh, Oksana, I'm not even surprised." I take my friend's hand, squeezing it tightly. "You have earned your place as one of the greatest bakers this kingdom has known. Of course the queen wants you there!"

Oksana's eyes fill up with tears, and I'm nearly overcome myself. Oksana has worked so hard to get her business up and running. In the beginning years, I tried to sneak away from home as much as I could to try and help her get this place in order. When they bought this three-story building, it was run down. But Oksana worked to make it what it is today. Now it has a bakery on the first floor and living quarters on the top two. She has more than earned this recognition. This is the best thing that could've happened to her, and my heart is so happy.

"I haven't even told you the best part!"

"There's more?"

She grins even more broadly and leans toward me, as if she's sharing a secret.

"Oh, yes, my dear Miraslava, you have been officially hired as my right-hand woman!"

CHAPTER

TWO

MIRA

At first, I don't think I hear my friend correctly. She looks at me with expectation, and I shake my head in confusion.

"You're hiring me?" I finally manage.

"Technically, the queen is hiring you! I told her there's no way I could pull this off with only my family as help, especially since Ma needs to stay here to run things for me, and the queen agreed for me to bring whoever I need. Of course, you're the best person I know. You know your way around a kitchen, you know how I operate, and you're the hardest worker I know. We've always been the perfect pair."

She's right. We work very well together. When I still don't say anything, she takes me by the shoulders, giving them a little shake.

"Don't you see? This is perfect! You'll earn more in two weeks than you could in half a year. Or more! The kingdom has flourished under Queen Calista, and she is generous with her payment. You will finally be able to be free of that wretched stepmother of yours the moment you come of age, or sooner, with absolutely no issues!"

The words settle over me as I finally…finally get past the shock. The tears I was holding back for Oksana spill over my cheeks. I grab her into a tight hug. She holds me close as I try to pull myself together.

At the back of my mind, I've always feared that even when I'm of age I won't be able to escape. Even though I have almost four years left before I can leave, if I get enough money, I can petition the kingdom to let me go early. I have to present a very convincing argument, making sure I outline how I will never be a threat to this realm. The money would pay for the documentation, the passage to the human realm, and a little something to get me started on the other side. It seemed like such an impossible plan I didn't even actually write it down. But now there's a glimmer of possibility. I heard that in the human realm, eighteen is the age of adulthood, so I won't have to rely on anyone to take care of me. I will be able to take care of myself, and be taken seriously as an adult. That's something I will never have with Feodora, no matter how old I am.

"Oksana, I don't even know what to say." I finally pull back from her, wiping at my damp cheeks.

"Say you'll take the job, of course. And we'll find a way to get you there."

"Oh my goodness," I exclaim, my mind snapping back to reality and everything this job would entail. "There's no way I can sneak away from Feodora for two whole weeks. She would never allow it. Or actually, she might. And then she'd take every *kopeika* I earned for herself."

"I thought of that, actually," Oksana says. "The royal family is making accommodations for travelers and those living outside the city to come stay near the castle for the duration of the celebration. They've opened up the inns and the houses near the palace. If you were to, say, make it seem like being near there is the only way to catch the royals' attention, Feodora and her daughters might choose to stay at one of the inns. Many other families living outside the city are doing so. I heard people talk about it in the bakery this morning. So, while your stepfamily is near the castle, you can ask to stay at the house, to take care of things."

My mind spins as Oksana talks, ideas taking shape. My friend is brilliant. There's a slight chance we could pull this off. Possibly. Maybe. There has to be a way I can work this in my favor. I'm trying to remember everything Feodora has ever complained about to see if any of it can be used to my advantage. Then, I realize there is something pretty obvious I can use.

"You know," I say, pacing a little as my mind works. "Feodora has mentioned how her life would've been so different if she had married a prince who supposedly proposed to her."

"When was she offered that?" Oksana asks, laughing.

"Probably before the wheel was invented," I mumble, sending my friend into another fit of laughter, but I'm still thinking. Pulling out my trusty little journal, I open it to a blank page and start making a list of ideas. Besides getting close to the royal family, I write down showing off her family to the nobles, as well as getting the first look at any of the exciting venues and events happening. Most of the celebrations bring vendors from all over the land, and a celebration that lasts a week will definitely have people traveling here to sell their goods and services.

However, no matter how much I look at the list, my eyes keep straying to the first idea. I think it's the one that carries the most weight for Feodora and her ambition.

"If I make it sound like the prince will be around, and he's old enough to take a bride, maybe I can convince Feodora to come show off her daughters."

"Oh, that's a great idea. Definitely use the prince."

The way she says his title has me looking up at her in question.

"What? Don't look at me like that. Have you seen him lately? That boy has become a man!"

I roll my eyes as she wiggles her eyebrows up and down. Then I get back to my journal. Everything has to be exactly right if I am to pull this off. I'll have to find a way to make sure Feodora cannot argue with me on this. But most importantly, I have to make sure it's *her* idea. She has to want to come to the inn early, instead of only for the week of the actual celebration. Since I'll be helping Oksana with the preparations, I need to be at the castle every day for two weeks. I can't leave her alone for the tough part.

Now that I think about it, there have been a lot more people on the streets this morning. It would make sense if invitations have been sent out for those who are coming in to be part of the bazaar.

There's always a bazaar. This land is known for its tradition of week-long events, and people travel from all over the realm to be part of those. Typically, a bazaar is set up at the foot of the royal castle, since people will have to enter through it to reach the castle itself. It's a smart strategy if the plan is to sell as much as possible.

At least, this is what I know of these types of events. I haven't been to any events since I was a young child. Last time there was a three-day festival, Feodora locked me in the kitchen to hide my bruised flesh from the public.

She's been sneaky about many things. It's my turn to be the same.

"Return to the land of Skazka, Mira!" Oksana waves her hand in front of my face, and I look up, a tiny apology on my lips. "You really don't care about Prince Luca?"

Wait, we're still on the prince? I'd definitely moved on. Now that I've come to think of it, I don't even know what he looks like now. The last I saw him, he was still seven years old and on one of those royal painted portraits. I cock my head to the side before I shake it, giving her a sheepish smile.

"I don't have time to think about boys, Oksana. Getting out from under Feodora's thumb is my top priority. It's way more important."

"Mhhm," she tsks before she pins the invitation back on her wall of recipes. "Just wait until you meet someone who changes your mind."

"They will do no such thing. I am a very focused individual." I grin at her as something else occurs to me.

"How is it I haven't heard about this?" I ask. My stepsisters would have been squealing about it nonstop if they had known. Their biggest dream in life mirrors their mother's—get married to someone rich.

"Oh, that's because the official announcement doesn't go out for a few more days. The only people who know are the staff that have been hired and the vendors traveling to the city. And some gossips in town, of course." Oksana makes her eyes big, and I know she refers to the few who come into the bakery regularly. They're probably the ones making plans to move closer to the inns. They need to be close enough to have all the firsthand information.

"So Feodora probably doesn't know about it yet," I say.

"I would assume not."

"I'll wait until we receive the official invitation, then," I decide, making a note in my journal before I put it away.

Just then, Oksana's sister Lubov pops into the kitchen, wrapping her arms around my waist.

"Hi, pretty girl. I see you've been working on new designs." I nod toward the pages spread across the counter. Lubov's dream, for as long as I can remember, has been to be a seamstress. She loves designing clothes as much as I love working with plants.

"You know it. What's the deal with this?" She points to the wall and the invitation. "What's the big deal about this anyway?"

Oksana and I exchange a look as Lubov peers closer.

"The deal, my dearest sister," Oksana begins, taking her by the hand and leading her to a chair. Lubov gives us a weird look, but we simply have her sit down as Oksana begins to talk. "Is that Queen Calista defeated a great evil twenty-five years ago, and it is time to celebrate."

"Are you talking about that Baba Yaga stuff?"

"Lubov, please tell me you actually know the history of *Zelenovo Korolevstva* and how Queen Calista came to be on the throne." Oksana gives her sister a look and the other girl shrugs. But I see the little gleam in her eye, and I realize what she's doing.

"Oksana, I think your sister wants me to tell a story," I say, and Lubov sits up immediately.

"I do, oh please, Mira. You tell it best."

I give the girl a broad smile, and then I clear my throat for dramatic effect.

"Once upon a time, there was a land filled with magic and wonder." Lubov leans forward, completely focused on me. This is something I've done for her many times. When Lubov was sick, my stories soothed her. Ever since then, she likes to hear them as often as I can tell them. This one isn't a story, though. It's our history, and I tell it the way Papa told it to me.

"The land thrived, with creatures living peaceably among themselves. But then, the Masters of the Shadowlands descended. Evil *volshebnitsi* craved power the land possessed. They brought with them actual shadows, clouding the forests and making the trees die without sunshine.

“Back in those days, the human realm was very guarded by the royal family, and only a few knew of the way there. *Znaniye*, the Orb of Knowledge, was the only way to pass through the In Between to the human realm. Not only that, but it also allowed those using it to pass through undetected.

“When it was time to fight the Masters of the Shadowlands–they called themselves Glava–,” I wink at Lubov and she grins. “Queen Calista was chosen to take the Orb to the human realm for safekeeping. What no one knew at the time was that she was part of a greater prophecy. A prophecy that talked about her being the downfall of Skazka.

“But she decided she would choose her own fate. With the help of her now-husband, King Brendan, and her friends, she stood up to the Glava and to Baba Yaga, who was working with them and overcame the destiny written for her. She created her own destiny.”

“And got a giant cat!” Lubov exclaims.

“Yes, Kot-Bayun, the mythical creature of the woods, who would eat soldiers and toy with travelers, gave his heart to the queen. She, being pure of soul, earned his favor.”

Lubov grins as I finish, her look turning a little wistful.

“I would love to see that cat,” she says. I’m not sure I share her enthusiasm. Kot-Bayun doesn’t show himself to many. He sort of appears and disappears, and only glimpses of him have been seen around the kingdom. He’s supposed to be turquoise and the size of a house. I definitely don’t want to meet him on the streets.

“Okay, Mira has to go, so finish up your chores,” Oksana says, pulling her sister off the chair. Lubov is only fourteen, but she has a smart mind and quick wit, and I have no doubt she’ll make dresses for all the important people one day. She gives me a quick kiss on the cheek before scurrying off.

I think back to the story and how I used to hold tight to the knowledge that whatever is written in the stars doesn’t have to be the path you take in life. This celebration is a testament to that power.

There’s a big chance this whole plan with Feodora will blow up in my face. But also, there’s a chance it won’t. I want to focus on that hopeful part, not only for myself but for Oksana. This means a lot to her and to her business. I don’t want to leave her having to deal with things on her own. My heart is full of happiness, and my mind is full of possibilities. Now, I just need to make sure this plan goes just right.

I HAVE ABOUT TWENTY MINUTES BEFORE I HAVE TO MEET UP WITH FEODORA AND THE GIRLS, SO I decide to help Oksana with her store’s front display. Since I put together the flower arrangements in the first place, no one protested when I put up an outside window box. Instead of filling it with dirt, I filled it with four individual containers. This way, I can rearrange the flowerpots as much as I want, changing them up in the stands and other shelves I have set up. The whole display creates a flower frame for the glass window, with *Oksana’s Bakery* written there in pretty cursive.

As I move around, watering a few thirsty-looking plant babies, the sound of the town reaches out to me. Now that I know about the celebration event, I definitely notice more people around. There’s a bit of excitement in the air as well, as if the land herself waits in anticipation. I’m sure once the official announcement goes out, the whole town will explode in a flurry of activity.

Obviously, I have my own reasons to be excited, but even if it wasn’t for the job, it would still be

incredible. Queen Calista has always done good by her people. Bringing back some of those old traditions—like week-long celebrations—is a gift she gives us as well.

It has always fascinated me to see such a contrast between people wielding power. My stepmother carries a title and could have done good with her resources, but instead, she spent them on frivolous things and now struggles to appear better off than she is.

Although, sometimes, I wonder if she has ties to less-than-reputable people, because money will show up randomly. A few months ago, Feodora even hired a tutor for her daughters. The woman comes in once a week and goes over various subjects with them.

Queen Calista has more power than I could put into words, and yet, she takes the time to care for as many people as she can. She has opened up orphanages and given jobs and resources to those who would have none without help. The kingdom thrives off of her kindness.

It could've been all so different if she chose to use that power for herself.

She was the one to open up trade between the human realm and Skazka, which brought even more opportunities to her people.

We're not the only kingdom with portals to the human realm. Some kingdoms, like *Volkovskoye Korolevstvo,* are near one of the trade access points, and they thrive on the trade they receive now that the passages are more open. But sadly, even with Queen Calista on the throne, *Zelonoye Korolevstvo* suffers from markets that are less than exemplary. It's such a market that Feodora has more than once threatened to sell me to. It's also where I think she might be getting some money coming in. Although, I still have no idea how.

It's why I'm so desperate for passage out of this land forever. It would be much easier to get lost in the human realm, even if Feodora decided to follow me. Following me would require a lot of money on her part that she does not have. It's a vicious circle of cunning, but it's my life, and I will fight for it. I want to go inside and hug Oksana all over again for taking me along on this huge opportunity. For giving me an actual chance at success.

As I finish up the last of the display, I move to arrange a tall plant shelf, moving it closer to the window. I pick up one of the planters as a woman and a small boy hurry by. He's weaving in and out of the crowd as she chases him, and I turn to watch the pure joy on his face as he dodges her grasp. My heart squeezes at the stern, yet kind, way the mother watches him, but I don't let myself dwell on the sadness. I always look for the good, and right now, I remind myself I do have some memories to hold onto and new memories to make. At the palace.

For now, I need to finish up this display and get back to Feodora. But before I can move, a body slams into me from the side. I drop the plant and pot, which causes the ceramic to shatter all over the ground. Kneeling to the ground immediately, I grab the plant, tugging carefully at the roots.

Immediately, my heart drops at seeing the broken pieces, my mind going back to the last time I broke something accidentally and the bruise I had to hide for days after. My body locks up automatically, even though I know Feodora isn't here to punish me. This has become a learned response, and I have to force myself to breath and to focus on the task at hand. Clean this up and fix it, if possible.

"Oh no, I am so sorry," a deep voice says from somewhere above me. Then, a man kneels beside me, reaching for the plant as well.

"It's okay," I reply as I try to untangle the roots from the pieces of the pot. My hand, shaking slightly, goes for a particularly big piece when the man reaches for it as well. Our fingers brush, just barely, but it causes an electric kind of contact that makes me look up. When I do, I'm startled by the greenest eyes I've ever seen, peeking out at me behind a lowered cap. I've seen others wear these,

and it shouldn't make me pause, but it does. The man tugs on the piece of the pot at the same time, and because the root is still attached, the plant flies out of my hands. I gasp as it lands beside the man. When we both reach for it, he squishes some of the leaves.

"Would you please just stop trying to help?" I say, keeping my voice firm but kind. My body's response toggles between fight and flight, but even as it shakes with suppressed trauma, I push my mind to stay rational. He's not my stepmother. But he does keep making this worse. At my words, he raises his hands immediately, and I pick up the plant, cradling it in my arms. The poor thing is going to need time to get over the trauma, but I think I can save it.

The man and I stand at the same time. I can't shake off the color of his eyes or the way that one look pierced right through me. There's something about him, I just can't place my finger on it. Instead of trying to figure it out, I move toward the other plants where I left one of the pots filled with soil that I brought out to freshen up the rest.

"I seem to keep messing it up, huh," the man—well, he's younger than I first thought—comments. I kind of wish he'd stop talking because his voice is a little too pleasant. He's tall, the top of my head coming up to his nose, and broad, like he knows labor. Unruly brownish hair peeks out from under the cap, and he's dressed like a visitor with a mixture of human slacks and loose *rubashka*. He seems to be closer to Oksana's age, yet he has an air of…well, there's something about him I can't quite place.

"It really is quite all right. Things happen," I say, keeping my head down as I back away, trying to shrink into myself as much as possible. From past experiences, I know it's easy for me to be snappy when cornered, and I work very hard not to react that way. Feodora makes sure I never make a scene or draw attention to myself, but it's hard to stay calm when anxiety starts to rise in my chest.

I feel him move beside me, and when I turn, he is much too close. I take another step back and hear a yell from behind me. Before I can move out of the way, his arm snakes out to grab me around the waist, pulling me toward him. My heart beats wildly in my ears, and I can't look away from his eyes. He's looking down at me, as if he too seems almost fascinated. I gasp, pushing away from him. He lets me go. Immediately, he steps into another flower stand that comes crashing down.

"Would you please just kindly go away?" I ask, my eyes rising to his. He's making me clumsy, and this will take money to fix. The tightening in my chest is back as I try to push past the panic. He moves to right the shelf, but I push past him, picking up the pots and checking over the damage.

"I really am sorry," he says. Something in his voice makes me look at him. His face is in the shadows, but now I know his eyes are green, and I can almost see them trying to see past my exterior. I'm reacting irrationally, maybe. I don't know. All my reactions are tied to my past experiences, and right now, even the sound of broken ceramic pots is sending my heart into overdrive.

"It really is okay," I say as calmly as I can. "But please, save me the trouble and don't touch anything else."

We stand there, with me clutching the plant and him studying me through his lashes. I'm not sure what he sees, but I wish I could hear his thoughts. There's a type of sturdiness about him. It's like, when he looks at me, he's actually seeing me. I've never understood this kind of fascination with another human being, but it feels like if I told him my secrets, he would actually listen. What kind of a crazy thought is that about a stranger?

"What are you still doing here?" Oksana's voice comes from behind me, and I turn to see her walking out, reaching for the plant. "Feodora will be looking for you at any moment!"

"Oh no." I thrust the plant at her and grab my bag. When I turn to the stranger, he's already gone and so are my thoughts of him as I race through the streets. I am in so much trouble.

CHAPTER

THREE

MIRA

When I reach the shops, Feodora is just coming out of the building. I'm a little out of breath, and the look she gives me could knock a man flat on his back. Good thing I'm used to it, so my reaction is automatic. I give her my regular smile, the one I reserve specifically for her, and she rolls her eyes.

"If you think you can get away with such disrespect—" she begins, as the girls step out of the store, followed by the shopkeeper. He holds half a dozen bags in his arms, and he hands them over to me before going back for more. It frustrates me to see Feodora spend what little money we do have on—are those feathered hats? My eyes must deceive me as I try to rearrange the bags in a manner where I can carry them all.

"Don't smoosh my hat, Mira!" Agrippina whines. Instead of replying, I move the bag with the hats into my other hand, placing it on the outside of the group.

"Where's the carriage, Mira?" Feodora asks once I'm standing upright again.

"Right on the other side of the building," I reply. I prearranged this when I hired the carriage because planning ahead when it comes to Feodora is always best. She gives me another disgusted look before turning toward the direction I pointed. Agrippina is right on her heels. Galina stops near me and reaches for one of the bags. It's probably the lightest of them all, but she takes it, giving me a small smile. I return it and follow them to the carriage.

When Papa married Feodora, I was excited to have sisters, but I quickly learned the only thing Agrippina cares about is herself. Sometimes, she pretends to care about Galina, but I think she would gladly throw her under a carriage if it meant Agrippina could marry a baron, or better yet, a prince.

My mind briefly goes to Oksana, the job, and the plan we talked about. I wish with all my heart that it works. If I spin it just right, I can make Feodora think it's her idea. But if I do it exactly right, I might have Agrippina do the work for me. She will whine until her mother gives in, as usual.

The driver is right where I said he'd be. He helps me rearrange the packages inside the carriage before I climb into the front seat with him. It's not exactly common for me to be riding with him like this, but it's much more comfortable than holding on for dear life at the back of the carriage. Feodora doesn't say anything, but I'm sure I'll pay for it later. That woman misses nothing.

That is why I have to be more cunning than she is in order to pull this off. There's no way I will pass up this opportunity not only to work at the palace but to earn a wage that will get me so much closer to my goal of freedom. Maybe, and I'm really trying not to hope too much here, but maybe I can even petition the queen directly. Queen Calista is the kind of person who would listen. Sometimes, I

wonder whether I could've gotten out of my predicament if I'd gone to her already. But the fear of retaliation from Feodora keeps me bound to her. For now. She thinks she's beaten the defiance out of me, but it's only been buried under layers of protective armor. I'm getting closer and closer to the day I no longer fear her or what she can do to me. Then, I can truly be myself. And if I'm brave enough to speak up, Queen Calista might listen.

As we bounce down the unpaved road toward my family's house, my mind shifts its attention to the green-eyed young man I met. Well, *met* is probably too strong a word. Now that I think about it, the interaction was a little amusing, especially how he kept making things worse the more he tried to help. But in the moment, I was definitely annoyed. I might've been a little rude too, but he kind of deserved it. Sometimes, when I'm cornered like that, the fire just bursts out of me. It's why I have to be in control of my emotions around my stepfamily. I can't be igniting anything around Feodora, not when she's so good at being angry at me already.

She only started using her hands six months ago, but it didn't take long for various behaviors to become triggering in fear that she might strike. I must've looked half crazed to the green-eyed man, yelling at him over a plant. Although, it was a plant, and I hope that poor baby recovers. At least he sounded sorry. And there was something in his eyes…

I'm not sure why I'm even thinking about him. Oksana would probably say I need to get out more, considering my mind is spinning over a complete stranger. Truth be told, it's probably my lack of social interaction that has me overthinking the run-in. Outside of my stepfamily, I hardly ever see anyone. Even when we go to town multiple times a week, I'm only allowed to see Oksana once, and only when Feodora allows it. Outside of that, I have to sneak away to see my friend when I'm not too busy running around doing errands for Feodora.

But none of that matters right now. In this moment, as we travel closer to my home, I think of all the possibilities that I see opening up before me. I'm a mess of contradicting emotions, and I hold onto each of them in turn.

The noise of bickering coming from inside the carriage snaps me back to reality. I sigh because there'll be more of that at home. But for now, the forest on each side of us steals my breath, and I live in this one peaceful, hopeful moment.

When we get back to the house, I'm quick to take all the packages back to their respective rooms before I hurry to the kitchen. Anna is gone for the day since she only comes in once a week and in the morning. Sometimes, I think Feodora forgets she still has Anna on as the cook. We try to keep her out of sight as much as possible to help keep that up. Anna left a few items prepared that I simply have to assemble. Bless her and her smart thinking. Quickly, I put the kettle on the stove and hurry over to the sink.

The bell starts ringing before I can dry my hands. Feodora doesn't like me being even a second late to meet her, and now I'm going to pay for it. But even the prospect of her wrath doesn't diminish the joy that fills my soul.

A way out. A true, actual, possible way out.

I repeat the words in my head over and over like a mantra. They'll get me through whatever is coming next. This job is a gift like no other, and my heart overflows just thinking about Oksana and

what she has done for me in this one simple gesture. Simple for her maybe, but it's a whole new world for me.

I can't stop thinking about it. I'm trying, but I can't.

Now I just have to make sure I can pull it off. I pour tea over the bags before assembling the cucumber, boiled egg, and bread sandwiches. The bell rings again, displaying Feodora's impatience. I put everything on a tray and hurry up the stairs.

It feels strange to live in two worlds like this, the modern and the old meshed together. I think Feodora likes the power it gives her, so there's no way she will invest in a microwave. I heard those are incredible and make tea a lot quicker when one is in a bind.

"What took you so long?" Feodora asks as I place the tray on the table, picking up the tea kettle. I simply don't reply. It's always best if I don't provoke, even though a million retorts are on my tongue. "I'm talking to you, girl."

Feodora yanks my wrist towards her. I gasp as my other hand—the one holding the tea—jerks and spills the liquid all over the table cloth.

"Look what you've done," Feodora says. Annoyance rises up within me. Annoyance and fear, always together, always keeping me locked in this limbo of wanting to stand up for myself and being too afraid. Pulling out a rag from my apron, I dab at the liquid. I'll have to wash it by hand after supper is done.

"Oh, so you're playing the quiet game today," Feodora says. I hate when she's like this. It's like even the sound of my breathing sets her on edge, and there's absolutely nothing I can do to deter her once she gets started. All I can do is keep my head down and remember this isn't forever. When I straighten, my eyes meet hers. I don't see the hand come up until it's slapping me across my cheek with so much force I stumble back against the table. I catch myself against it, and my hand curls into my pocket and the knife I carry hidden there. But I don't pull it out. It's an anchor, something to hold onto. I simply raise my head again, meeting her gaze.

There's so much hatred there it nearly takes all the light out of the room. I don't understand this complete and open disdain she carries for me, but it's as strong as the foundation this house is built upon.

"So that's how it's going to be today," she says, glaring death at me. When the second slap comes, I expect it, but it stings even more. There's a moment of stillness as I catch my breath before Feodora points to the table. "Bring us fresh sandwiches. These have been tainted by the spilled tea."

I didn't even hear the girls enter the room, but they're there, taking their seats at the table, their eyes gleaming. Well, Agrippina's are. She's as cruel as her mother. But Galina gives me a tiny smile before she takes her seat. I hurry out of the room, taking the sandwiches with me. As I step into the hallway, I lean against the wall briefly. I try to catch my breath, try to control my body's shaking.

No one, beside her daughters, knows Feodora hits me. She's been doing it for a few months now, and even though I can protect myself physically, I don't. She holds too much power over my future. I cannot give her any more ammunition against me.

One day, when all of this has passed, I will sit with this pain and I will deal with it, but for now, I push it all down. I lean against the wall, take a few calming breaths, and then hurry to the kitchen to make more sandwiches. None of the ones on the tray are actually ruined, but I stick them in the refrigerator as I make a few new ones. Rearranging them on the plate, I also bring more hot water with me for the tea. Squaring my shoulders, I keep my head high as I hurry back up.

There's hope at the end of it all, I remind myself. I am strong enough to handle whatever comes my way.

Now I just need to get through dinner and figure out a way to spin my tales to Feodora. Operation *Get This Family out of the House and Into an Inn* is a go.

CHAPTER

FOUR

MIRA

By the end of the day, I'm so exhausted I can barely stand. After I hand-washed the tablecloth, I scrubbed the whole dining room, floors and shelves, and every surface that might carry any speck of dust.

The girls had their tutoring session while Feodora sat and watched them. I have no idea how she can afford to pay the older woman, but she's been coming regularly for almost half a year now. Every session is a different lesson, sometimes on Skazka's history, sometimes on math, which is Agrippina's least-liked subject. The woman also tutored them in music, mostly piano, but it was a truly awful experience so Feodora made them stop.

Once the woman—even after all this time I don't know her name—is gone, Feodora gives me a few more cleaning chores. According to my daily to-do list, I was supposed to prune the garden today, but that's not happening. I hope the plants forgive me for the neglect.

"Miraslava! Why is my bath not drawn?" The shrill voice of Agrippina echoes around the room. I'm on the way to her bathroom when she yells, but it's not going to matter to Feodora. I hurry along, carrying the towels I grabbed.

"The water is perfectly heated up for you, Agrippina," I say, and turn the faucet to the exact correct spot that produces the right temperature. "Your skin deserves the best," I add, and it does the trick. She huffs before stripping, just as I add bubbles to the bath. We have showers in the house, but no one bothers. They insist on baths every night. Thankfully, all I have to do is make sure they're in and situated before I leave.

After Agrippina is settled, I head to Galina's room. She's sitting on her bed in a towel, reading over a comic she must've grabbed in town. I don't even want to know how much that cost, since it's clearly a human realm item. I don't say anything as I walk past her and draw her a bath.

"Are you ready?" I ask, when she doesn't move toward the bathroom. She jerks her head toward me. She gives me that small smile and walks over to get into the bath, leaving the comic on the bed. From where I am, I see it says something about an engagement in the pictures. I glance over at the younger sister.

"Could you braid my hair tonight?" Galina asks.

I smile, moving toward her. She's the only one who ever asks anything of me, instead of just expecting it. But even with all her nicer tendencies, I have seen the dark side of her too. A few months ago, she was so jealous of her sister she cut off a chunk of her hair while Agrippina slept. There's a lot under the surface of this girl, but I now think she's my best bet when the time comes for me to

make my move. If she can't talk Feodora into it, she can definitely talk Agrippina into doing it for her. Agrippina was my original plan, but now I'm not sure. I guess the only thing left to do is try and see if I will have to persuade the other sister or if this one will be enough.

It takes me a few minutes to braid her hair and pin it to the top of her head so it doesn't drag in the water. Then, I leave her too.

Feodora is next, and with the mood she's been all day, I'm nervous as I head to her room. She's standing by the window when I enter through the open door. She doesn't acknowledge me as I head to the bathroom.

This was my parents' room, and I know it well. Every time I step foot in here, I'm nearly swallowed by conflicting emotions.

"You were with that baker today, weren't you?" Feodora says, coming into the bathroom just as I'm done adding the bubbles and the salts. "Don't you dare lie to me."

"I was," I reply, standing up and turning to face her.

"She is a bad influence on you. Don't you see that?" Feodora continues. "She encourages this rebellious streak in you, and I don't know how to help you."

My heart feels heavy in my chest as a familiar fear grips it. If Feodora forbids me from seeing Oksana, I won't survive. She's the only living connection I have to my family. Even as I panic, I show none of it on the outside.

"I'm sorry I was late, Stepmother," I say, keeping my voice low. "It won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't. I have been good to you, Miraslava. That can always change. There's only so much I can do."

I know what she refers to. She's threatening to sell me off like a piece of furniture. Even though slavery is no longer a part of our culture, there are still deals on the black market for people as possessions. I'm not surprised Feodora knows of them.

"Good night, Stepmother," I say as she steps into the bath, already dismissing me in her mind. I close the door behind me without waiting for a response. Then, I head to the kitchen.

I need to eat something. I only managed to sneak a few bites as I was preparing dinner. When I reach the kitchen, I see the fire is still going strong, but I add a log to it anyway. I would love nothing more than to light the fire pit outside and go sleep under the stars, but Feodora refuses to allow me that. Maybe she knows that was something I did with my parents. Maybe she's just being spiteful and refuses to give me any leeway to enjoy myself. The kitchen fire is the only one I have as a companion, so I make myself a little plate of rice and milk, add some sugar to it, and settle on the floor in front of it.

My limbs feel heavy and spent, but my heart is full of hope. When the time comes to find my bed, I don't bother. I grab a seat cushion and a blanket I keep nearby and lie down in front of the fireplace, lulled to sleep by the crackling sounds and the dancing flame.

THE OFFICIAL INVITATION TO THE CELEBRATION ARRIVES THE NEXT DAY. I WOULD BE LYING IF I SAID I haven't been antsy with anticipation. Oksana sent word through our next-door neighbors that I am to report to the palace in three days' time. If the invitation didn't arrive in time, I would have had to come up with something. But it came, and now the neighbors are leaving to stay near the palace, so if

need be, I'll use that to help my stepfamily figure out that they too need to be close to the queen.

But then the mail finally arrived, and the shiny envelope on top had the queen's seal. Of course, Agrippina grabs it first, squealing loud enough for the whole forest to hear.

"Oh my gosh, Mother! Mother!" she yells as Feodora steps into the room. "Look at this! I knew it. I knew one of these days the prince would notice me and—"

"Get a hold of yourself, Agrippina," Feodora snaps, snatching the envelope out of her daughter's hands. Galina stands close to them, eager to see what's inside. I stop my dusting of the curtains and turn to see as well. It would be strange if I wasn't curious, after all.

Feodora cuts the seal and opens the envelope expertly. I watch as her eyes scan over the page. I can almost see the gears turning, her eyes lighting up with possibilities. Dare I say, there's almost a smile on her face as she looks at her daughters.

"A celebration, my dears." And there's that smile I've come to know only as scheming. "The whole kingdom is invited to the palace for a week-long celebration for the anniversary of Queen Calista and King Brendan. There's not one but three balls! Masquerade balls!"

"What?"

The girls grab the paper out of their mother's hand and proceed to jump around, looking at it and then at each other and then at the paper again. I wonder if now would be a good time to make my move. It may not be the best moment, but I know I have to say something.

"We'll have to order you the most incredible of gowns," Feodora says, her mind already scheming. "We have to make sure you stand out. And the—"

"The whole kingdom is invited?" I speak up, keeping my voice hopeful. The girls and Feodora stop their celebration instantly, turning to face me. Feodora's eyes narrow immediately, and she does a quick once over of my body.

"Well, that's what it says. But we shall see. There's much work to be done, and I need you to handle it all. You know how important this is to your sisters. You wouldn't want them not to have their best opportunity to represent the family, would you? There might be no time for you to put together a gown of your own, let alone three."

I know what she's doing, but I'm not even mad about it. I can use it to my advantage. Still, I incline my head and move back to the curtains as they go back to making their plans.

It's not even thirty minutes later that Feodora has a list for me. I take it gladly and start making calls. We have one phone in the whole house, and it's in Papa's old study. Feodora keeps the cord to it and only allows me to use it when it's convenient for her.

Papa told me once that when Queen Calista became the ruler, she wanted to introduce our land to more modern conveniences. Communication devices, such as phones, were some of the first items she introduced. The kingdom used to send messenger boys or girls to deliver any kind of communication. After Queen Calista brought over the phone, they dug lines under the ground, so as not to disturb much of the forest. One of the things she has always tried to do is to keep the integrity of the land. Skazka is a living, breathing entity, or at least that's what Papa used to say.

I know I struggle a lot with the concept of magic for someone who lives in a land full of it. But it has never touched me directly, so I have no use for it. I have use for cold, hard facts. Right now, those include Feodora and the girls scheming to get close to all the important people, which means I can really sell them on moving to the inn. Being in close proximity to all the excitement would make it much easier for Feodora to sink her teeth into some innocent but rich bystander.

Once I'm done making phone calls and scheduling fitting appointments that I have no idea how Feodora is going to pay for, I focus on my own to-do list. The one where I get Agrippina to beg

Feodora to take them to an inn near the palace. And for that, I need Galina.

That night, as I'm braiding Galina's hair for bed, I drop the hints.

"Are you excited to head to the palace?" I ask, running a brush through her hair.

She nods, smiling at me in the mirror.

"Oh yes! I'm especially excited for the dances. I've been practicing a lot, and it'll be fun to finally try it out with a partner other than my sister," she says, making a face.

I smile at that. Her excitement is contagious, even if I didn't have an undercurrent of my own already flowing through.

"When I was at the bakery, I heard the prince is finally ready to look for a wife," I say, keeping my voice low like I'm sharing a secret. Galina immediately sits up a little straighter, her eyes growing big in the mirror.

"Seriously?"

"You know how the maids like to talk."

"It's true. The maids know everything."

It's hard to keep my smile hidden, but I manage somehow, keeping my expression schooled into mischief.

"Can you imagine if you caught the prince's eye? That would be something."

"Oh, it would. But he'd never go for me. Agrippina is much more his type." I'm not sure how she knows what the prince's type is, but if that's true, it's a good thing I have no desire to be around him. Someone with such bad taste is bound to be a bore.

"I don't think that's true," I say, focusing entirely on Galina's braid so I don't appear too eager. "But I did hear girls are lining up to stay at the inns near the palace, just to catch a glimpse of him."

Galina's eyes grow even bigger, which I didn't think was possible. But I can see the wheels in her head turning.

"We're so far away," she whines as I finish the braid and move to pin it. "We don't even stand a chance!"

"It would be easier if you were in the thick of it," I comment, trying for nonchalance. I think I succeed because she doesn't say anything else. She just moves to the bed, and I stand, my job done.

It doesn't seem like enough, but I can't push. I have to hope Galina will say something to her sister, who, in turn, will talk her mother into going. I'm running out of time here, and I have no idea what my other options could be. It's either this, or I have to forfeit.

CHAPTER

FIVE

MIRA

When I carry breakfast into the dining room the next morning, the sound of Agrippina's whiny voice reaches me first.

"We have to go, Mother. Everyone will be there. And if I'm not there, the prince won't have the chance to meet me and fall in love. Don't you want that for me?"

"Love? No." Feodora scoffs as I place toasted pieces of bread in front of her. Her words don't surprise me at all, but it still saddens me to know Papa didn't know love at the end with her. Not that he ever tried to replace Mama. It was more about finding companionship and having someone to look out for me. Now there's only me looking out for myself.

"I want you to marry for security. Love won't keep you warm or fed or clothed."

"Well, it's not supposed to keep you clothed," Agrippina mumbles, and I almost forget I'm not supposed to be listening. Feodora glares at her daughter but doesn't comment. She butters her toast before putting jam on it. Then, she takes a few bites with sips of tea before speaking again.

"What exactly do you want from me?" she asks, looking at her daughters.

"Move us to one of the inns near the palace. Everyone is doing it!"

"And how would you know what everyone is doing?" Feodora raises her eyebrows.

My heart drops. I didn't think this part through. If she knows the information came from me, it'll be too unreliable for Feodora's taste.

"The mailman stopped by and talked to the gardener from next door," Agrippina replies. The man who takes care of the gardens at our neighbors' comes over to help me move the big branches, even though he's not supposed to. I haven't seen him in a few weeks, so I'm not sure what Agrippina is going on about. Feodora throws me a glare but doesn't comment.

"And I overheard some maids talking in town," Galina adds, not making mention of me, for which I am grateful. "I didn't know they were talking about the celebration, but it makes perfect sense. And the maids know everything."

She sips her tea then, and I have to hand it to the girls; they really do know how to spin a tale. Sometimes, I don't give them enough credit. Personally, I don't dare even to breathe too loudly right now as Feodora mulls over her daughters' words.

"I suppose the smart thing to do would be to stay closer to the castle, and be seen," Feodora says.

I can see where this is going. She's about to make it all her idea. "If the royal family were to call on us, we wouldn't want to be so far away that we couldn't be there. It would be smart to stay in one of the nearby inns, at the heart of the city. We would be available for any royal outing, keeping our

connections alive."

By *available*, she means scheming her way to be close to them, but I'm not mad. This is working, and all I had to do was plant a few seeds. I move away from the table, placing the pretty china dishes back into the cabinet I took them from earlier. Feodora insists on using the best dishes, regardless of whether we have company.

"What about her?" Galina asks.

I don't have to turn to know they're talking about me now.

"Right," Feodora says. I don't react until she calls me. "Miraslava. Come here."

Putting the dishes down, I walk over to her.

"Yes, the girls and I are going to stay at one of the inns near the palace for the duration of the preparations and for the celebration itself," she announces, as if she came up with this brilliant idea. The girls jump a little in their chairs, but they don't interrupt. "We, of course, cannot leave this house sitting empty for days, so you will remain here and continue running it smoothly. I will have a list ready for you before we go. You know how important it is that everything runs smoothly." There's that word again. "We wouldn't be able to do so without you, of course. And I know how much you love being home alone."

She's good. I have to give her that. If I hadn't learned to recognize the tactics, I might actually be inclined to believe them. But all I do is nod my head in agreement.

"Of course," I say.

She looks happy with herself, as if she's given me this great gift. "Now run along and find us a place to stay. Then, we need to get packing. All the best places will fill up fast, so we need to move now. Not a minute to waste."

I nod again and hurry off to make preparations. It's a little worrisome to think what kind of to-do list Feodora will leave for me, but I'm determined to make this work. If I have to skip a few hours of sleep every night, it's a small price to pay for my dreams.

"I'll make a few calls and make sure I'm in the know about all the activities," Feodora says as I walk away. This is perfect. If she plans out her whereabouts, then I can make sure mine are anywhere far from hers. My chest fills with an unfamiliar feeling of hope. This actually has a high probability of success.

It takes the rest of the day to get everyone packed and ready to go. The next morning, I send the family off in a carriage full of their luggage. I offered to come with them, but Feodora made sure to make it seem like it would be an inconvenience to me. She truly does not want to be seen with me. She doesn't want anyone to remember I exist. Plus, the inn has staff, so it's not like she or the girls will be doing anything on their own.

Honestly, I can't believe this worked. I am now fully capable of working with Oksana for the celebration. I thought for sure Feodora was going to find me out. But no, Agrippina really played her part like a pro. Granted, she is a pro at whining until she gets what she wants.

"I'm here and ready to work!" I announce as I step into Oksana's kitchen. My best friend nearly squeals as she rushes over to me.

"You did it! Feodora isn't aware?"

"As far as I know, she is not aware," I reply, pulling my trusty bag over my shoulders. I then reach for the journal inside. "To the best of my ability, I mapped out the festivities and where she and the girls should be at all times during the week of preparations and the celebration itself. There is a very high chance I will never have to cross paths with them. And since I'll be wearing servant's clothing, it should help me hide, even in plain sight. Not that I'm planning to test that."

"Of course, it'll be harder to hide when you actually go to the ball."

Oksana's words pull me away from my list. I glance up at her in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you have to go to the actual ball. Everyone is invited."

"We're already going to be at the celebration. Working. I don't think we have to attend the ball as…participants."

"We will discuss it later." Oksana waves me off, and I narrow my eyes at her. She's clearly up to something, but I'm not sure if I want to know about it right now. I'm riding the high of having one thing going right for me today. I'd like to keep that for a little longer.

"Where do you need me?"

For the next two hours, Oksana and I make lists and pack supplies to take to the palace. The palace is obviously stocked with everything we'll need, but Oksana has some utensils and such that she can't live without. She calls them her babies. Tetia Rosa will be staying at the bakery to take care of things while Oksana is occupied at the palace, so we're not taking that much. But Oksana does let me make all the to-do lists I want.

Putting everything on paper calms my mind and allows me to feel a sense of control over my life. According to Papa, I've always been like that. Even as a little kid. He said I got it from Mama, even though I can't really remember her being this particular about her lists. She could keep everyone and everything organized, but she didn't need to write it down like I do. She's only ever done it with plants. I use lists for everything. I'm not sure if it's a response to something or what, but I relish the fact that I know this about myself.

After my papa died, I didn't think I knew anything about who I was anymore. I never thought I'd have a chance to figure it out. But there's finally a light at the end of this tunnel, and I can't wait.

While Oksana leaves the last of the instructions for her ma and sister, I walk outside to check on the plants. They seem to be doing well, even with all the trauma they experienced last week. I apologized about ten times to Oksana, but she waved me off, of course. Tetia Rosa replanted the poor lily that nearly got trampled. I glance around, almost expecting to see the green-eyed man. He's not there, not that I actually expected him to be.

If I'm being honest, he's crossed my mind a time or two, but I never allow myself to dwell. I mean, I'm only a girl. Of course I'd be affected by a handsome man. And he was handsome, even though I kind of don't want to admit it to myself. But I'm not about to tell Oksana that. She'd put out a call for him while she plans our wedding.

I check the soil one more time and then I rush to catch up to Oksana. We arrive at the palace in about twenty minutes. When we step inside the kitchen, even I have to take a second to appreciate its grandeur.

Everything is bright and clean, yet lived in at the same time. A large counter outlines the room with burners and ovens in between. There are big counters in the middle of the room with sinks at every station. I watch as others make a place for themselves at the counter or the tables. Clearly, more areas were set up for people to work, but even with all the bodies in here, there's plenty of room.

"This kitchen is incredible," Oksana breathes.

I can't help but grin at her look of complete awe.

"Ladies, hello." One of the men wearing an apron approaches us. "You must be the baker."

"That's me," Oksana replies, smiling up at him. He gives her a broad grin in return, and I notice the way his eyes crinkle at the corners with laugh lines. I don't miss the way Oksana's cheeks turn a little pink.

"Great, you can set up over here."

He leads us to a counter shaped at a ninety-degree angle that's near a three-door oven. I lean over to my friend, nudging her with my shoulder.

"You might want to close that mouth of yours," I whisper.

She shuts her mouth immediately. She's been staring at everything in wonder, and my heart fills with happiness on her behalf.

The man, Yura, shows us where everything is stored and who's taking care of what. Next, he helps us unpack. Well, I think he's helping Oksana unpack more than anything. He seems to be only a few years older than she is, his hair a dark ginger, freckles covering his nose and cheeks. His eyes are light, and they remind me of another green-eyed man.

Goodness gracious, I am thinking about him way too much all of a sudden! What is it about him that fascinates me so? I need to shake it off, that's for sure.

A noise catches our attention, and all three of us turn toward one of the doors as a woman sidesteps the mess one of the kitchen workers just made. She looks very put together. Her bun is tight. She wears a traditional *sarafan*, red and gold, with a white *rubashka* under the red straps. She says something to the girl who dropped the dish and then she leaves.

"Who's that?" Oksana asks.

"That's Miss Sofia," Yura replies with a little shrug. "She's one of the main people who run the regular palace staff. She likes to gossip, so beware."

Oksana and I exchange a glance but don't comment. There are always people like that around. We'll just have to make sure we don't talk about my family or sneak around when she's present.

"We brought rolls for anyone who would like some," Oksana says, pointing to the trays. Yura grins.

"Oh, the fellas working outside in the courtyard would love some, I'm sure," he says.

"I'll take these," I say to Oksana as she reaches for a tray of rolls. "You stay here and…get situated." I give her a pointed look that she pretends not to understand. Regardless, we'll be having a conversation later.

I leave her to her flirting and take one of the trays of rolls through the door Yura pointed to. I have to work to keep my balance as I push the door open with my back. When I step out, I see that I'm in a hallway. To one side, it stretches farther into the castle. Paintings the size of tables line the walls on both sides. There's a staircase on the left leading up and a matching one on the right leading down, with a large painting of the forest on the wall in between the entrances.

A couple dozen meters down in the opposite direction is an opening in the hallway that has columns on one side. I can hear people talking, so I turn in that direction. Once I step up to the columns, the space opens up to a large courtyard. I see men and women moving around, decorating various parts of the space while others clean it. I can't help but stare.

The courtyard is huge. A giant tree stands right at the center of it with more trees growing on all sides, outlining the paved portion at the center. The central area is smooth cobblestones and this is where the dance will be held.

The rest of the courtyard looks like a mini forest. Large and sturdy trees, including evergreens and

maples, fill the space. There are also flowers everywhere. Some are in planters around the tree trunks, some on their own. There are paths leading farther into the garden, making me wonder just how big it is.

What draws my attention the most is the tree in the middle. It's unlike anything I've ever seen before. Instead of housing one kind of flower, it houses many. The vine decoration on the invitation suddenly makes sense. This must be one of Skazka's ancient trees. There are a few of them throughout the land, according to the stories I was told as a child. I didn't know there was one inside the palace, though.

Then again, I don't know much about this beautiful structure where the monarchs live. At the front of the building, there's a small moat. The facade is more castle-like with strong stone and upper level walkways. It even has smaller windows at the top.

Once past the facade, the rest of the building opens up into a palace. Beautiful artwork lines the walls, with gold and silver trim on the frames. The rooms are large, and even from a quick study down the hall, there seem to be many of them.

This building is a bit of a contradiction, just like the tree is.

But I'm not here to gawk at the beauty. I almost shake myself visibly to snap out of it. I have rolls to deliver. A few people glance up at me as I approach, and I make my announcement.

"I have fresh rolls for anyone who wants one," I say, smiling at the group before me. The workers do not hesitate. I can tell they've been working outside for a while. There are tables on either side of the courtyard holding water and juice, so they're staying hydrated. But it looks like they haven't had their lunch yet.

"Thank you, Miss," one of the men says, taking a roll. "It's another two hours until our lunch break, and we are all hungry."

"Of course," I reply and continue moving through the ranks.

Even though I can tell there's magic in the air, a glow of sorts that lights the courtyard—it's always more dominant closer to the palace—the decorators are still placing lights and lanterns all around. The trees are strong enough to house the lanterns on their branches. Fairy lights are woven around branches and trunks and placed as a net of sorts over the leaves. It's going to look incredibly gorgeous once the sun goes down. I can picture it in my mind.

The smell of the bouquet of flowers that seems to be growing in the tree draws me closer. I can't help being fascinated by it. It would be amazing to climb right up there and see how it all looks from high in the branches, but I'm pretty sure even the kind Queen Calista would frown upon that.

I turn back to the workers and see one moving backward in my direction. His shoulders are broad, his hair dark brown and mussed, but that's all I can see. He's much taller than I am. He keeps walking backward, looking up. I sidestep him, ending up on the other side of the tree. He seems to follow, because in the next moment, he's crashing into me, rolls spilling all over the ground.

"Oh!" I drop down to the ground immediately, trying to salvage as many as I can.

"I'm so sorry." I hear a deep voice, and my hand freezes over the roll I was about to pick up. Slowly, I look up, up, up, and then the man drops down beside me. Now, I'm looking into the most striking green eyes—ones I've seen only once in my life before.

"You!" I exclaim. That's when I register the shock on his features.

"You," he breathes out. I'm not exactly sure what kind of emotion I hear behind that word. It's there and gone before I can identify it.

"I always seem to be underfoot." He chuckles, and finally, I shake myself free of whatever spell his eyes hold on me.

“You are nothing but trouble,” I say, keeping my voice firm. That tight feeling springs into my chest as I think of all the wasted food and how it’s my fault. No. I push the intrusive thoughts away and breathe. It’s difficult not to go into the darkness, but I must stay in the present. It’s just a few rolls. It’s not the end of the world. Although, this has got to stop happening before I lose it on someone. “You should watch where you’re going. There are many people around, and you just created a hazard. And cost me a number of rolls.”

We stand together, my heart racing as I try to keep calm and he hands me one of the rolls he picked up.

“I’m sorry.”

My mind immediately snaps to Feodora and her apologies. The words that she says sweetly, in public and in front of an audience, and never actually means. People like her—like him—don’t pay attention to anyone but themselves!

“I really wish you’d stop saying that and simply watch where you’re going.” I raise an eyebrow at him. As we stand face-to-face, I realize just how imposing he looks. I’ve never been a small girl, but near him, I almost feel that way.

“Maybe you just bring out the worst in me,” he says. His voice is light, but I absolutely take offense at that. Maybe my brain is meshing his behavior with that of my stepfamily, but I cannot separate the two, and it’s making my head spin. I’m slowly losing my grip on the situation, and my cheeks feel flushed with embarrassment.

“Me? You think this is my fault?” I raise my chin, trying to look as stern as I can be, to get a grip over my emotions like I’m supposed to. “If you spent two seconds looking around you, you would see there are other people present. The whole world does not revolve around you.”

“Miss?” One of the younger boys comes up, reaching for a roll.

“I’m sorry, these fell to the ground. I’m not sure if you want any.” The boy grabs one anyway, and I smile. Then I turn back to the man still standing in front of me. Although, calling him a man might be too generous. He can’t be but a few years older than me.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I hope this has been a learning experience for you. And that it will not happen again.” I turn to go, but the young boy’s laugh stops me.

“What is it?” I ask, looking at him as he stares at me and then at the guy beside me.

“You are very disrespectful, Miss. I don’t think you’re supposed to talk like that to the crown prince.”

With that, the boy turns and rushes off, leaving me to face the, apparently, crown prince alone. I turn to look at him, and the grin he gives me makes my head spin.

“Prince?” I ask.

“At your service,” he replies.

CHAPTER

SIX

LUCA

The absolute mortification on her face is worth getting reprimanded. It's not that I want to embarrass her, but the way her cheeks turn rosy as she stands up straighter is too adorable for words.

Apparently, I'm the kind of guy who uses words like *adorable* now.

My parents must be rubbing off on me. Great.

"Luca of *Zelenovo Korolevstva*," I introduce myself, extending my hand to her. She looks at me, then at the hand, then raises the tray she's still holding. "Ah, yes." I take back my hand, now the one embarrassed. That's not something I experience often.

Being the prince kind of puts me in the category of never being the one in the wrong. Well, I'm wrong all the time, but people overlook it. I don't want them to. They just automatically do it.

Except for her.

This is the second time she's stood up to me, calling me out on my clumsiness. Typically, I am not that clumsy, but when I'm around her, it has become a problem.

"It's nice to meet you, Your Royal Highness," she says. "I must get back to the kitchen now."

She pivots on her heel and walks away from me. I stand frozen for a moment before I hurry after her.

"You know, it's customary to offer a name in return once one has been given," I comment, keeping pace with her.

"It's also customary to look where you're going," she replies before expertly sidestepping a man kneeling down, arranging lights around a planter. I almost walk into that same man. I apologize before I hurry after her again.

"Is this how you usually are?" I ask.

"What is that supposed to mean?" She doesn't pause her power walking.

"Being this prickly."

That finally gets a reaction. When she stops abruptly, I pass her without realizing it. But then I stop and head back to where she stands in the middle of the hallway, eyebrows raised.

"You think I'm prickly?"

"I most certainly do," I reply, placing my hands in my pockets and rocking gently back on my heels. I'm not sure what it is about her that makes me want to push her buttons, but here we are. Maybe it's just the knowledge that she'll push mine right back. Even after a brief encounter, I know she can handle herself, and I find that fascinating.

“Might I remind you that you were the one who nearly destroyed my lily, and then you just now destroyed perfectly delicious baked goods? I think if anyone is allowed to be prickly around here, it’s me.” She makes a face as if to say *so there* and turns to walk around me. But I’m not done yet.

I move into her path. She stops for a moment and then goes around the other side, but I’m there once more. She won’t look at me, but I can see the frustration settling in her shoulders. I’m not sure if she's the violent sort, but I can totally see her kicking me. Is it strange that I wouldn’t mind her trying?

Yes, that’s strange. I’ve officially lost my mind.

“Would you please move?” she asks, sighing with the question.

“Not until you tell me your name,” I reply. She looks up at me then. I’m not sure why she looks so surprised. Maybe because she didn’t think I actually cared to know, but I do. I cock my head to the side, studying her face for a moment. When she realizes my attention is entirely on her, she ducks her head.

What a contradiction.

She’s ready to stand up and speak out, but the moment someone looks a little too closely, she hides. Maybe that’s why the word is out before I can stop it.

“Please?”

It’s barely a whisper, but it seems loud between us somehow. She glances up at me again, and this time, she holds my gaze right back. I’m not sure what she sees, but the way she studies me makes me want to hide.

There are so many secrets I carry deep within me. I’m not sure if I’ll ever trust anyone enough to share all of them. And I definitely don’t think this stranger would be that person. But it kind of gives me the hope of finding someone like that.

My mind goes to my parents and the bond and love they share. It’s the kind of trust that allows for no secrets between them. They know every part of each other and love the other anyway.

I’m so lost in my own thoughts I don’t even notice she has taken a step back.

“Your Royal Highness.”

When her voice reaches me, I meet her gaze. She nods briefly before she steps around me and hurries to the kitchens.

MIRA

I’VE BEEN MORTIFIED FOR HOURS. EVEN AFTER OKSANA ASSIGNED ME A BUNCH OF PREP WORK, AND MY hands got busy, I couldn’t stop thinking about the fact that I nearly yelled at the prince of our kingdom. Granted, I didn’t actually yell. I very firmly told him he was a complete mess and needed to check himself. But that’s just semantics.

“What is with you?” Oksana asks as we finish up for the day. Some of the staff members are staying at the palace, but Oksana and I are going back to our respective homes. She’s not far, and I have a list waiting for me at my home. I need to make sure the house is in top shape in case Feodora suddenly shows up to make sure I’m rebuilding the fireplace or something. She had me build an unnecessary wall once, after all.

My back still carries the reminder of the last time I disappointed her, but it’s more an

uncomfortable feeling than actual pain. My parents would never want me to stay at that house only for the sake of keeping it in our family. And they especially wouldn't want me there if it means enduring Feodora and her wrath. So, only a little while longer.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I reply, not wanting to get into it. I should know better. Oksana can get me to admit to anything.

"Spill, Mira. Something happened. It's been written over your face all day."

The only secrets I've ever managed to keep from Oksana are the beatings. Although, I think she knows. I think anyone who's ever met Feodora knows. But there's nothing to be done about it. Yet.

"Okay, something did happen. But it's not a big deal," I say before I dive into the explanation of my first and second meetings with the prince.

"Not a big deal?" Oksana exclaims a little too loudly. I shush her, glancing around. We're walking back to her house first so I can leave my uniform there. People are everywhere. Oksana chuckles before lowering her voice.

"Miraslava, you met the prince. THE PRINCE! The gorgeous, eligible bachelor."

"Okay, calm down." I should've known this is where her mind would go. She sees hearts where I see pebbles. "I was rude to him."

"No, you were not rude. You are hardly ever rude. You're so nice it's sickening. But you're no pushover, and I'm happy to hear even around a handsome face, that's still true."

"How do you know he's handsome?"

"Ha! So he is handsome!" She points a finger at me. Seriously, she should be a spy or something. She can get anyone talking about anything, which makes her a great salesperson. I don't enjoy it when it's turned on me.

"I didn't notice," I say. It's her turn to roll her eyes.

"Please, you did notice and probably memorized his face for later. Now, we absolutely must get you into the balls! This is perfect."

"What are you even talking about, you crazy person?" I ask, shaking my head. "I'm not going to the balls. I can't. Even if there was some way to get around being seen by Feodora, I have nothing to wear." I point at myself and the servant's dress I was given by the palace staff. The simple blue garment with a square neckline and sleeves that go down to the elbows has only a little golden stitching on it. The material is soft, however. Even though it's prettier and more embellished than any clothes I own, it's still not enough for a masquerade ball.

"Well, luckily, you have the bestest friend in the world and she knows people."

"Oksana, seriously, what are you planning?"

"Just wait and see, *moya dorogaya*. Just wait and see." The gleam in her eye is a little worrisome, but we have arrived at her house, and it's time for me to go. I change into my own dress quickly before grabbing my bag and rushing for the door.

It's quite a walk back, and I have to go through the forest. Even though I'm exhausted from the day's work, a part of me relishes this quiet time I can have to myself.

Papa and I would take walks after Mama died. We would go so deep into the forest, I'd think we were lost half the time. But somehow, Papa would always lead us back home. Mama may have taught me to love the world around me and to appreciate nature for the gift that she is, but Papa made sure I held onto that love for the rest of my life.

I miss them so fiercely, it's like a burnt forest inside me that I can't ever imagine regrowing. I place one hand over my heart, near my necklace, as I walk. I breathe in the fresh air of the evening and think about what my parents would've thought about today. Or what I'm doing in general.

I think they would be proud of me for staying strong and would be supportive of me following my dreams. I hope one day I can make them so proud, the pain inside me will lessen, just a tad. I want them to know they raised a strong woman. I'm determined to be that, always. My hand clutches at the necklace under my clothes, and I take comfort from it being there.

As I hurry home, my mind drifts back to the prince. I can't believe I actually spoke to him, let alone spoke to him like *that*. Papa always said I had a strong disposition about me, and it's only gotten stronger in the years he's been gone. However, reprimanding a grown man isn't exactly something I do often, and here I've done it twice already to the Crown Prince of *Zelenova Korolevstva*.

Before I can think too much on it, the sound of hooves on gravel reaches me. I move to the side of the road, nearly into the trees, to let the rider go by. But when a full minute goes by and no one appears, I slow my walk, glancing around. The road is empty both ways. The setting sun casts shadows through the tall trees that line the road. The sound of hooves and then a horse neighing reaches me again.When I twist around, I see a rider in the woods.

He's far enough away that I shouldn't be able to hear him as clearly as I do, but that's not the only thing that surprises me. He's dressed in all white, riding a white horse. I can't help but stare at the sheer size of the animal. Just then, the rider turns in my direction, as if noticing me for the first time. My hand reaches for the knife I carry hidden inside my dress pocket, something Feodora doesn't know about. I don't pull it out, instead finding comfort in the weight of it against my palm. But I'm ready to use it if need be. The rider stares at me for a long tense moment before he turns and races off into the forest.

I stand there for a moment longer, contemplating whether I actually saw the rider or my exhaustion is catching up to me. Instead of going back to the road, I stay near the trees as I turn back to my house. It's not another ten minutes when I hear the horse again.

This time, I search the trees immediately as I reach for my knife, expecting the white rider. But it's not him. A streak of red catches my attention and then another rider, this one dressed all in red and riding a red horse, comes into view. He seems to be as aware of me as I am aware of him. He pauses for a moment and then he's gone.

Now I know I must be hallucinating because I've never before seen a horse that color. My heart clenches in fear. I'm all alone in the middle of the woods, and now there are two strange men riding around.

Picking up my speed, I watch as the sun dips into the horizon, leaving me in almost complete darkness. It's another fifteen minutes to my house, and I need to hurry. Technically, I know these woods are blessed by Skazka itself, and she is a land that loves her people. But that doesn't mean people aren't still out there, trying to make a way for themselves. I don't want to be caught in anything I can't handle.

Although, Mama made sure I had a little self-defense training. It's one of her knives that I carry on me. Every lady should learn how to dance and how to protect herself. It's a rule both of my parents lived by.

When I'm nearly to the house, and the sun is barely peeking over the horizon, the horse sounds come again. This time, I don't stop to look around but focus my attention on reaching the gates.

Just as they come into view, so does the rider. He races out of the woods on the right side of me toward the road, pausing only briefly to look at me. This rider is dressed all in black and riding a black horse. As his face turns toward me, the sun disappears below the horizon, and I'm left in near darkness with this person. My whole body is tense. I pull my knife out, keeping it hidden in my skirt.

However, he doesn't approach me. After one brief look, he races into the forest on the opposite side of the road.

This has been the most ridiculous journey home I have ever taken. The moment I pull the gates open and step inside, I shut them behind me. My heart is beating loudly in my ears, my body stiff with tension. I force air into my lungs, trying to find some calm.

I've always loved living on the outskirts of town. Our house is bigger than a lot of those nestled within the boundaries of the city. However, the walls that serve as a fence are mostly only at the front of the property with the large gates. The back of the house opens up into the forest, and in the back of my mind, I know that if those riders wanted anything from me, they could find a way in. Our nearest neighbors are about a ten-minute walk away, and they're in the city for the celebration.

After a few moments, my mind clears and the fear seeps out of me. They didn't attack me or even approach me. They were strange, sure, but I don't think they meant any harm. It's probably just my nerves after the day I had.

Immediately, my mind shifts back to the prince, looking for a way I can make things right with him after the way I acted. Maybe avoiding him would be a better plan. He seems to bring out…something in me. And I really don't want to offend him, which I keep doing. I think.

The house is quiet when I step inside. Anna has been given two weeks off, since there is no use having her cook for no one. I'll have to find a way to pay her under the table.

She can't afford not to have work, as unsteady as this job has become for her.

Instead of heading toward the rooms, I head for the kitchen. It's the easiest place to keep warm, as the ovens stay heated even long after they've been turned off, and the fireplace here is larger than the one in the living room. My face blossoms into a smile when I see a little note on the counter.

"Make sure to eat" it says, in Anna's signature handwriting. I follow the arrow she drew toward a pan covered on the stove. When I raise the top, the smell of potatoes, vegetables, and meat in broth drifts toward me. Feodora never would've allowed Anna to make such a wasteful amount of food, but since she's gone, Anna made it just for me. My eyes fill with tears at the kind gesture, and I realize I'm hungry.

Taking a bowl out of the cabinet, I pour myself a good helping of the stew before I head toward the small table near the fireplace.

That's when I notice the other piece of paper. Well, it's more like a whole page out of a notebook. I glance down at it, seeing the list of chores Feodora wrote out for me. She wants to make sure I'm here and busy and not embarrassing her at the palace. I shake my head a little, chuckling to myself. She's as predictable as snow in winter.

Leaving the paper where it lay, I stir the embers in the fireplace and place a few logs on it to watch them burn. This is what I associate with the smell of home, this kitchen and this fire. I take a seat and enjoy my food. I know it'll be a long night of me trying to catch up on chores, but even with all the excitement of the day, it's been such a good one. One step closer to my goals.

CHAPTER

SEVEN

LUCA

The girl has been on my mind all day. Well, if I'm being honest with myself, all week. She's beautiful, of course, but there's just this pull I feel toward her. Like, I want to sit under the stars with her and talk about all the world's wonders. How crazy does that sound?

The palace has been busy with preparations, and my parents asked me to come up to the office. There's more going on under the surface. I've seen the way Mama tenses in meetings. Maybe they're finally going to let me in on their secrets.

"You look absolutely beautiful, *zaichik*." Papa's voice reaches me as I step into the room. Mama is grinning at him as she pulls him down toward her by the collar of his tunic.

"Right back at ya, handsome."

"Okay, okay, son is in the room now!" I announce myself, and my parents turn to glance at me. Mama smirks before she pulls Papa all the way down, dropping a quick kiss on his lips.

"My eyes!" I yell, covering them with my hands.

"You are an adult now, Luca," Papa says, straightening up and giving me a look. "Shouldn't you be over this?"

"No. I am never going to be old enough to bear seeing my parents make mushy eyes at each other and all that." I wave my hand in their general direction. "Can I come closer or are you going to be lovey dovey some more?"

Mama laughs, flipping her long brown hair over her shoulder and cocking her head to the side. She knows I'm only kidding. Truth be told, I love seeing just how in love my parents are after all these years. They didn't have an easy time of it in the beginning, having to battle the darkest of magical sorceresses, Baba Yaga, and Mama's own demons. They lost each other for a while there, in a way they never thought they could survive. But they overcame all that, fought for their love to be no longer forbidden, and here I stand. I'm on the edge of my adulthood, carrying my own demons and aimlessly running around trying to figure out how I'm supposed to be king of anything if I can't even make a flame with my fingers.

"You wanted to see me?" I ask, pushing the disturbing thoughts away.

"*Da*," Mama says, her voice turning "queen" as she turns back to her desk. "As you know, the anniversary celebration is next week, and the other royal families have begun to arrive with more ambassadors to follow. The Krasneyev ambassadors will be here first. I'd love for you to take their daughter, Ekaterina, around the kingdom to show her a bit of our land."

Mama says all of this in her most nonchalant voice, but I narrow my eyes anyway. Papa is

standing by the window, looking out at the gardens. Glancing between the two of them, I realize this is not a simple request. All their silent communications and stolen glances suddenly make me more suspicious.

"Mama, please tell me you're not marrying me off to the Northern kingdom."

Both of my parents turn at that. I can tell I didn't quite figure it out, but I am onto something.

"Of course not. I would never make you marry for political reasons," Mama says.

"But?" I prompt, and she glances up, sighing.

"You're too smart for me," she says.

"No, I just know you too well. What's going on?"

Mama glances at Papa, and he gives her the slightest of nods before he moves away from the window. Mama raises her hand in the air, twisting it in a small circle before making a fist. Even though I can't see her magic, I can feel it spread around the room.

She made it soundproof.

Papa takes a seat beside me, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

"There have been rumors about Baba Yaga."

I sit up straighter at that, glancing at Mama. Her eyes carry that hard determination I've come to know well. She will do whatever it takes to protect those she loves and this land. Baba Yaga has been the greatest threat and the greatest evil that's ever walked the land of Skazka and a thorn in Mama's side for years.

"I thought Baba Yaga was stripped of her powers." Mama nods at my words before she stands and proceeds to pace around the office.

"Unfortunately, what your father and I did wasn't a lasting spell. I stripped her of her powers, and I would've figured out a way to make it permanent if she hadn't escaped. But in the years since, she's been regaining her strength, meddling in smaller spells and bargains, casting curses to gain magic back, and trying to reopen her suppressed inner powers. She's too ancient and too learned to not be up to something major."

I let Mama's words sink in, mulling over this new information. Everyone knows the story of how Mama became the queen of this kingdom of Skazka. The land itself aided her in defeating Baba Yaga and her minions. Mama's destiny was that of destruction—she is, after all, a descendent of one of the darkest Russian sorcerers. But Mama chose for herself, and with the help of Papa and Uncle Maxwell, they were able to withstand and prevail. The land hadn't chosen a queen in centuries, but it did so with Mama.

But now, if Baba Yaga is back, it means the peaceful existence we've been living for over twenty years is about to come to an end.

"What have you heard?" I ask, glancing between my parents.

"There's been talk, specifically about magic resurfacing in *Zelenoye Korolevstve*." Papa replies, his voice carrying a note of the soldier he's always been. Before I was born, my parents would travel around Skazka, retracing Baba Yaga's steps after she escaped. Right around the time I was born, the trail went cold, and she disappeared entirely. Even though I've never had to deal with her directly, my parents made sure I knew the history and what would be required of me if the time ever came. Too bad I can't actually help fight her—or magically bind her. But maybe I can be good at this.

"Basically, you need intel. But you need to get it in a way that doesn't raise suspicion."

"Yes," Mama says, turning to me. "I know you've been going into town." Of course she does, nothing gets past her. "Take Ekaterina around, show her the sights, find out what she knows, and listen to the gossip people are sure to spread the moment you start showing your face in town. Once the

other young women guests arrive, take them on miniature dates as well. You're an eligible prince, after all. It won't look suspicious if you're courting."

Mama is strategic, I have to give her that. No one wants to talk to me when they don't know who I am, unless I make inquiries. But if the prince is prancing around town, people will talk. They will speculate, and we might be able to glean some information from that as well as from the traveling dignitaries.

"We know it's a lot to ask—"

"Not even," I say before Mama can apologize. "It's a small price to pay if it will keep the kingdom safe."

Mama walks over to where I'm sitting, bending down to drop a kiss on the top of my head. Her hand squeezes my shoulder, and I place my hand over it.

I've always been a little useless when it comes to the matters of running a kingdom, my own insecurities and past mistakes weighing heavily on my heart. But I always try to do my best, and this is no different. Smiling and wooing pretty girls shouldn't be that hard. I just have to play my Prince Charming card, is all.

MIRA

AFTER I EAT MY DINNER, I GET SOME OF THE CHORES OUT OF THE WAY. FEODORA MADE SURE THAT everything on her list is immediately recognizable when she comes back, like rearranging all the furniture in the sitting room and trimming the hedges outside. She also, apparently, wants me to paint the outer garden wall? I read that twice and shake my head. I'll have to make sure to get some paint in town.

Rearranging the furniture and scrubbing down the walls and baseboards is my best bet, so that's where I start. At least this way, if she shows up unannounced, it looks like I'm working on it. I quickly discover the furniture is almost too heavy for me to move. I'll have to go slow. Feodora tortures me even when she's not physically present.

"Oksana, I'm a little nervous," I say the next morning after sleeping only a few hours. My body is sore from all the manual labor, even though the majority of me is excited to be back at the palace. Then there's the tiny part that's nervous.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," I say, rolling out the dough we made last night, "I have no idea if Feodora is going to show up at the house or not. I don't even know what she's been up to. Did she stick to the original plans she made? Who knows! It's been two days, and I keep expecting her to jump out at me from around the next corner."

"Don't be silly, Mira. Feodora doesn't jump. That would be too commoner of her."

I give my friend a look as she tries not to smile, and she sobers up immediately.

"I'm serious."

"Me too. Have you ever seen—"

"Oksana!" I can't stand it anymore because now I feel like I'm going to have a full-on panic attack. My chest feels heavy, and I force myself to take some calming breaths as I lean over the

counter.

"I'm sorry." Oksana hurries over, placing a comforting hand on my back. "I know this is stressful for you. But you don't have to worry."

"How can you be so sure?" I ask, looking up at her.

"Because Yura's cousin works at the inn they're staying at, and I have him bring me updates when they see each other." She says it so nonchalantly, looking down at her work, but I can't help but stare at her like she's grown two heads.

"You have Yura's cousin watching them?" I repeat slowly, just to make sure I heard her right. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised she roped him into helping her, they were making eyes at each other. Even if she won't admit to it.

"*Da*," comes from behind me. I turn to see Yura coming up with a crate of flour. "My cousin, Sasha, he's a good lad. He keeps me updated throughout the day." Yura gives Oksana a bright smile, and she blushes. Then Yura places the crate near us and stands up grinning. "Don't you worry, Mira."

With that, he sends a wink at Oksana and hurries off to whatever next errand he has to run. Slowly, I turn to my friend, who watches Yura's retreating back with a huge smile and rosy cheeks.

"I knew it." I shake my head, and she jerks her head toward me.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You keep saying that, but I don't think you know what that means." I wiggle my eyebrows at her, and she blushes deeper. My heart fills with happiness for her, because Yura seems just as smitten as she is. Glancing over to him, I watch as he turns, and his eyes find Oksana's right before he steps back out of the kitchen.

Then my mind catches up with what they both said, and I focus on my friend.

"You told Yura about me? And you told his cousin?"

"*Nyet*, I told Yura about you, and he gave pieces of information to Sasha. But like we said, you don't have to worry. We're watching your back."

Tears pool in my eyes, and I have to hold my breath for a second to get a grip on the overflow of emotions I'm feeling. The ups and downs are giving me a bit of whiplash, but it's the fact that I have someone watching out for me like this that nearly does me in.

Oksana has always been there for me, but this seems like almost another level.

"I don't deserve this kindness," I say, nearly hiccuping over the words as I try to keep my tears at bay.

"Oh, *milaya moya*." Oksana drops what she's doing immediately to walk over to me and pull me into a hug. "You deserve this and so much more."

"I just feel like you're doing all these things, and I haven't done nearly enough to repay you for your care."

"Miraslava." Oksana pulls back to look me in the eyes, and suddenly, it doesn't feel like she's only five years older than me. There's so much wisdom in her gaze. "Love is freely given, not something you have to earn. I hate that you live in a place where you have to constantly prove your worth, because you shouldn't have to. You are more than enough."

I nod because she's right. Regardless of how Feodora has made me feel all these years, I know my worth, and I know the kind of woman my parents raised and wanted me to be. But sometimes, when the crushing weight of the world settles on my shoulders, it overshadows the truth I carry within my heart.

"*Spasibo*, Oksanochka," I say, pushing the tears away. "You truly are one of a kind."

"Isn't that the truth?" My friend steps back, walking over to her side of the table. "Plus, you have

sacrificed so much for us. Don't think I will ever forget you sneaking out under Feodora's nose to bring medicine and pea soup to Lubov. It's the only thing she would eat, and it and your stories saved her. You are also one of a kind, Mira."

"We can't all be one of a kind." I chuckle.

"And why not? We are our own women, and as such, unique in ways that are specific to us. We just have to make sure to remember that. And remind everyone else."

"Like Yura?" I ask, sending a wink her way. She blushes again. Wow, it really is so easy to get that response from her.

"We shall not talk of such silly things," she replies, glancing around. I get it. Gossip travels fast, and she probably doesn't want things ending before they even begin.

Like my relationship with the prince, for example.

The thought slams into my head uninvited, and I push it down. Why would I even put prince and relationship in the same sentence? It must be the exhaustion. I have to make sure I stay out of his direct line of sight any time I walk outside this kitchen today. I don't want to insult him again. That seems to be the only thing I'm capable of doing.

Shaking my head and all thoughts of the prince away—he's been at the back of my mind nonstop—I get back to work. Part of all the prep work is feeding the crews working around the castle. There are a lot of rolls to bake today.

CHAPTER

EIGHT

LUCA

I'm at the northern end of the courtyard, helping one of the guys hang lights in the tree, when I hear my name being called. I make sure the man is down from the ladder before I step out of the shadows and watch Jemma zero in on me. The moment she sees me, she doesn't hesitate to launch herself at me. I meet her halfway, catching her in a hug.

"How's my handsome boy?" she asks, stepping back and reaching up to pinch my cheeks.

"The boy is taller and larger than you now," I say, grinning down at her, as I lean over to drop a kiss to her cheek. "You still think that's an appropriate term for me?"

"Oh, yes, *malchik*," she replies, making me smile. Her pronunciation is getting better. "You will always be my handsome boy to me."

Jemma is a human through and through, born and raised in the human realm. She's beautiful, with long blonde hair and shining brown eyes, and she's been a staple in my life since I was born. Mama met her when she was living in the human realm without her memories, and they've been best friends ever since. Baba Yaga's cronies even kidnapped Jemma at one point, but even through it all, Jemma never lost her sparkle. That's what I call it. She has no magic, only knows a few Russian words, and doesn't understand our way of life, but she loves all of it. And us. But most of all, she loves her husband, Mama's best friend from childhood, Maxwell. He just stepped around the corner, his own smile spreading across his face.

"Is Jemma pinching your cheeks, Prince?" Maxwell asks.

"As usual," I reply, before stepping over to give him a hug. Maxwell is the historian, the keeper of records for our kingdom. He resides in a house in the human realm that's almost like a gate between this world and theirs. Time moves differently there, just like it does in our realm, so Jemma and Maxwell can be together. Two people from two different worlds. Since we age much more slowly than humans do, part of the magic Skazka has given us, my parents and Maxwell still look like they're in their mid-thirties. Since Jemma married Maxwell, she has inherited the slower aging from him. They're another story of love prevailing over everything. I call them aunt and uncle because they're family, even if not by blood.

"Are you guys staying for the whole two weeks?" I ask as Jemma loops her arm through mine and turns toward Mama's office.

"And then some," Jemma replies. "We couldn't miss such an important moment of history for this kingdom. Plus, Maxwell has some work to do." She looks over at her husband as he nods. The look that passes between them clues me in on the fact that they're aware of what's been going on around

the kingdom. Of course, that makes sense. They were there during all the Baba Yaga madness. They'd want to help now.

"Do you think—" I don't know how to ask the question without making my worry show, or by spreading gossip, considering there are a lot of workers around.

"I think that we don't have anything to worry about," Maxwell replies, and that surprises me. Mama is clearly worried. But it is her default state, since she's the queen. I want to ask him more questions, but I can't. Not here at least.

Just then, a flash of blonde hair catches my attention. I watch as the girl who wouldn't tell me her name bends down to lift a wooden plank, helping one of the men get it positioned. I'm moving toward them before I realize what I'm doing. When she looks up, her eyes meet mine. She freezes, a bit dazed for a moment, before she shoves the plank up, picks up the discarded basket near her feet, turns, and disappears between the trees. I stand there, dumbfounded. She really doesn't seem to like me.

"Who was that?" Jemma asks, coming up beside me. I did kind of abandon her there for a moment.

"I'm not sure," I say, before shaking my head and glancing down at her. "We should go." I offer my arm once more, and she takes it.

"For someone you say you don't know, it sure looked like you did," she comments, but I don't take the bait.

"Tell me about your latest art piece," I say, steering the conversation. She gives me a look that means to relay that she knows exactly what I'm doing, but she doesn't push.

"First, I have another project I'd like to tell you about," she says just as we arrive at Mama's office. I knock, and when Mama says to enter, I push the door open and watch as she jumps from her chair, rushing at Jemma. The two embrace as if they haven't seen each other in years, when in reality, it's only been a few months. Maxwell stays near me, waiting them out, just like Papa always does.

It never ceases to amaze me just how well they all suit each other. They each really found their exact half, the person that completes them in a way no one else can. I don't think I'll find the same in my many fake dates with the ladies of the Skazka kingdoms. My mind shifts to the blonde-haired girl, but I push that away immediately. I've talked to her twice. I'm not supposed to put her in the same category as potential…interests? Technically, the other young women are not interests anyway, but this is getting complicated already.

"Where's Brendan?" Jemma asks as Maxwell steps up to give Mama a hug.

"He should be here any second," Mama replies just as he arrives. He's barely through the door before Jemma turns to Mama, an intense look on her face. "What?" Mama asks.

"I was telling Luca here that I have a new project," Jemma begins. Maxwell walks over to her, taking her hand.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense!" I say, but then suddenly Mama is squealing like a child at a festival. I take a step back as she rushes at Jemma.

"What exactly did I miss?" I look at Maxwell, and he's grinning broadly.

"Jemma is pregnant," he announces, and there's a threat of tears in his eyes, and then I'm the one grabbing him in a hug. I know how much this means to them after all these years. For a while, they were afraid they couldn't have children. They've tried a few times, even asking Mama for magical remedies, but nothing worked. Not until now, apparently. As with all things in life, the timing had to be right.

"Perfect," Papa says as he hugs Jemma tightly. "We have another thing to celebrate this week."

As I stand there, watching the four most important people in my life laughing and talking, I'm even more determined to do everything I can to help Mama keep this kingdom safe. Maybe then I can

finally earn my right to be the next king of *Zelenovo Korolevstva*.

MIRA

I'M HEADING BACK TO THE KITCHEN, SURE OKSANA IS READY TO GO, WHEN A TUG OF CURIOSITY diverts my steps. Once again, I find myself heading for the courtyard and the large tree standing there. All day, no matter what errand I'm sent on, I always want to return to the tree and study it more closely. It's too fascinating for words.

When I step past the columns, the area is empty. The workers have either gone home or left for supper, leaving the tree alone for the first time all day. Something about this tree makes me feel like I'm looking into the past and toward the future. I step closer, fascinated by the subtle glow radiating off the leaves.

This is something Mama would've loved. My hand reaches for her necklace before I can stop it. I press it against my chest beneath my clothing. For a moment, the vast span of time closes, and I feel like she's right here with me.

I step closer to the tree, wondering how much trouble I'll get into if I climb it. The pull to be up there in the midst of the branches is nearly overwhelming.

"If I let you climb the tree, will you tell me your name?" His voice reaches me right before he steps into view. I immediately move backward two steps.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't know anyone was here." What I wanted to say is that he always seems to be around. I think he can read the words on the tip of my tongue, if his grin is of any indication. Not that I'm looking at him. In fact, I'm doing my best not to.

"Well, I do live here," he says. At that, I roll my eyes. He chuckles, and it's a pleasant kind of sound that I really should not be noticing. Or wanting to hear again.

"I hope you have a good night, Your Royal Highness," I hurry to say as I back up a few more steps.

"I think I liked it better when you didn't know I was the prince," he comments. His words have the desired effect because I abandon my escape and finally look at him. "Ah, there she is."

A shiver runs up my spine at his words, and I push it away.

"What does that mean?"

"It means," the prince says, coming completely around the trunk and stopping a few feet in front of me, "before you knew I was a prince, you simply called things like you saw them. Now, it's almost like you're rewriting your responses in your head before you speak out loud." He cocks his head at that. It's quite annoying that he can read me so well. It's exactly what I'm doing.

"You caught me in an…unbalanced time before. I'm not usually so rude to strangers."

"I didn't find you rude," he says. It's such an honest response it kind of surprises me. "You very kindly told me to get lost because I was trampling your flowers. Someone else in your shoes probably would've yelled and screamed and gotten the guards involved."

That's a little dramatic, but his description is so precise, I raise an eyebrow at that.

"Had some experience with that, have you?" I can't help but ask, receiving another one of his careful chuckles. That's how I'm coming to think of them, I realize. He doesn't quite laugh fully. It's a

polite kind of half laugh. Genuine, but careful. I've noticed he's been that way with his people too. It makes me curious.

"I may or may not. That's a secret I won't tell." His voice turns even more playful, and it's difficult not to fall under that charm. Luca—the crown prince—is as handsome as his mother is beautiful and as charming as his father. It's a dangerous combination.

"Well, it's a secret I won't pry into," I say, surprising myself when the tone comes out almost playful as well. I didn't think any of this lightheartedness was left in me, but here we are. He's studying me in that piercing way of his, the way that makes me feel seen. Suddenly, I feel self-conscious about the way I look. My dress is covered with a day of work, and my hair is in a half-unraveled braid on my shoulder. I have the sudden urge to smooth it down. Instead, I curl my fist into my skirt.

I open my mouth to say good night again, when a giant shadow catches my attention. It flies right over the wall at the back of the courtyard, high enough to clear it, before it drops beneath the trees. My hand reaches for my knife, which I've thankfully kept with me in the pocket of my servant's dress. I'm moving toward the prince before I can even think of what I'm doing.

My hand wraps around his wrist, pulling him behind me as I raise the knife.

"What are you doing?" he asks, his voice deeper, somehow, as if he needs to clear his throat. I drop his wrist, but I take a step in front of him.

"Protecting you," I say, my eyes on the trees in front of us. "You need to get back. Something just came over the wall. I'm not sure how the soldiers missed it, but it's coming this way and—" A sudden growl shuts me up. I watch as two giant eyes peer at me from between the bushes. I realize the prince hasn't moved. I spare him a glance, placing a hand on his chest to push him back. "Go! I have no idea how I'm going to hold it off."

My heart beats wildly in my chest. I just hope what my parents taught me about fighting is enough. I practice with my knife and sometimes a sword as much as I can, but there's never enough time. Still, the prince doesn't move, and now I'm worried.

When my eyes land on him, however, he doesn't look scared at all. There's a sort of awe in his gaze that seems to freeze time. No one has ever looked at me like that, as if I'm the most fascinating and capable person they've ever met.

"It's Kot-Bayun," the prince says, his voice barely above a whisper. He clears his throat, his eyes still on me as I shake my head in confusion. "It's my mama's cat," he clarifies.

I turn back to the creature, my knife still raised. But then the prince steps in front of me and makes a little *tsk* sound with his lips. Right then, a giant turquoise cat steps out of the shadows. The prince walks over to it, and the animal, which is the size of an elephant, butts his head against the prince's outstretched hand. The creature's purr vibrates the ground we stand on.

"Hey." The prince is suddenly beside me. I didn't even see him move because the cat is now looking at me. I feel a slight pressure on my hand, and I glance down to find Luca wrapping his own around mine, pushing it down. That small contact snaps me out of my paralysis. I sheathe the knife, taking a step back.

"It's a cat," I say.

"That he is," the prince replies, a big smile on his face. "You didn't know?"

"I did. Of course I've heard the stories. But hearing about him and seeing him are two completely different things. Excuse me for being startled," I say. This time when Luca laughs, it's a slightly different sound. I glance at him and find his eyes on me.

"What?"

“I like it when you’re honest.”

“When am I not honest?” I’m genuinely curious.

“When you filter your words because of who I am.”

That stops me. It clearly bothers him, and for some reason, I decide here and now that I don’t want things to bother him.

“You know, they say be careful what you wish for,” I say, giving him a pointed look. “Because if you want me to be honest, I can do that. It might be mean.”

“No.” He shakes his head with a certainty that surprises me. “It won’t be mean. There’s too much kindness in you.”

I have no idea how he can tell that after only a handful of meetings, but there’s no hesitation in his words. The cat meets my eye over the prince’s head, as if assessing me for danger. He glances at me, then at Luca, and then with a big rush of air, he turns and disappears into the thicker part of the garden.

“I guess Kot-Bayun agrees.” Luca’s voice brings my attention back to him. He’s watching me, the same way the cat just did, as if trying to figure me out. I’m not sure what drives my next words, but they’re out before I can stop them.

“Mira. My name is Mira.”

CHAPTER

NINE

LUCA

I've been thinking about her all day. Even as I go about my daily lessons—I'm still trying to learn as much as I can about the trade between our realm and the human one—I keep picturing her in the glow of the ancient tree, hair wild, eyes determined, her whole body ready to fight to protect me. It's an image I'm going to carry with me always. Of that I have no doubt.

After a late breakfast, I spent some time with one of the royal visitors. That was uneventful, to say the least. She knew absolutely nothing about the kingdom she lives in, and thankfully, her mother called her away after only about thirty minutes.

One would think spending time with a bunch of beautiful young ladies wouldn't be such a chore. One would be very wrong. It's not that spending time with them is a chore. It's the constant worry I carry at the back of my head, wondering if this will be the one to tell me Baba Yaga has returned. I have to be charming, and I have to be inquisitive about more things than just their favorite hobbies or songs or foods.

I'm overthinking this. I know. But I can't help it. So much rests on my shoulders, and I don't want to fail. If I'm going to be a ruler one day, I want to bring something to the table, not only my mother's name and legacy.

"Your Highness." The steward's voice breaks me from my thoughts, and I turn my attention to receiving the guests. Mama and Papa stand to the side, a little in front of me. I don't think they noticed my mind wandering. I take a step forward now, a smile on my face.

"May I present to you the royal ambassadors of *Korolevstvo Tsvetov*, Mr. and Mrs. Krasneyev, and their daughter Ekaterina."

The man and his wife both wear traditional clothing. He is in a white long-sleeved shirt with brown trousers and she is in a *sarafan* with blue fabric, white lines, and golden thread woven into patterns. They're both brown haired and brown eyed. Their daughter is an immediate contrast to them. She's wearing a pantsuit—an entirely human realm ensemble. Her much lighter hair falls around her shoulders in waves, instead of being braided like her mother's. When she meets my eye, there's a professional curiosity in her gaze. I respect her on sight.

"This is our son, Luca." Papa is motioning me forward, and I extend my hand for a shake, as is customary. Since they're not family or close friends, we don't move to give them a kiss. A handshake is satisfactory. My parents begin their hosting spiel immediately, and I move toward the daughter.

"Do you travel to many kingdoms?" I ask, because I honestly can't remember meeting her before. If I had, I'd be embarrassed. She gives me a polite smile.

“This is my first time officially traveling with my parents,” she replies, her voice smooth and practiced. “I’ve been tasked with keeping you company, so shall we?”

I think she’s a bit disturbed about this arrangement—there’s no way my parents told her about Baba Yaga—but we will play our parts perfectly. I give her a grin, ready for the challenge.

“After you.” I motion her toward the gardens. Mama said a walk around the grounds should be first as I put our guests at ease, and then an outing to downtown. Although, with most of the vendors setting up in front of the castle for the celebration, we probably won’t have to go far.

As we move through the hallways and toward the main courtyard, I can’t help but look around for Mira. I really shouldn’t think about her right now. I should be doing what my mama asked and pry some information out of Ekaterina.

“Is becoming an ambassador also your life’s path?” I ask as we walk. She carries herself confidently, as someone who’s been around politics her whole life. She has, so it shouldn’t be surprising. Her words are, however.

“Not at all. I love to travel, but I have other aspirations.”

“Such as? If you don’t mind me asking,” I hurry to add. She spares me a quick glance, but there’s a sparkle of mischief there.

“If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you,” she says, her voice low. I can’t help but chuckle.

“That’s very menacing.”

She straightens, shrugging. “I saw it in a movie. It’s cliché, but I think it’s kind of fun.”

Mama and I have watched a few movies before, so I know what she means. But it still surprises me a little. Movies aren’t all that widespread around these parts.

“Where did you get to do that?” I ask, sidestepping some of the workers rushing past. Even after a week of preparation, there’s still so much to be done.

“The human realm. Dad took me there to get acquainted with some of his contacts.”

“I didn’t know his duties extended to the other realm.”

“Well.” She turns, giving me a quick once over, as if assessing how much information to share. “As you know, the unrest in Skazka didn’t go away just because Baba Yaga was defeated. There are still plenty of bad seeds running around.”

“I thought seeds were planted.”

“Precisely.” She inclines her head, and I understand what she means. When Baba Yaga was rising to power, she manipulated a lot of followers into being willing participants. They didn’t go anywhere after she disappeared.

“So he deals with…weeding those out?” I ask.

“Among other things. Since our kingdom is closest to the majority of open trade portals, it’s only natural that he’s an ambassador to both realms.”

It feels like she’s leaving out pieces of information, and honestly, I would too. It’s not like we’ll go around sharing our kingdoms’ secrets.

“Is that your passion then?” I ask, genuinely interested. She gives me a little smile.

“Possibly.” She moves even closer then, tucking some hair behind her ear as she lowers her gaze and voice, as if she’s sharing a great secret. “I have this thing,” she says. I lean forward as well, intrigued. “I don’t spill my plans to strangers.”

She glances up at me then, from behind her eyelashes. She’s good. I have to give her that. I’m immune to the flirting, however, since another young lady fills my mind. Still, I laugh, impressed.

Right then, something catches my eye over her shoulder. I shift my gaze, and there’s Mira, her eyes on me. For a second, neither one of us moves. Her eyes shift to Ekaterina before falling back on me.

She raises one eyebrow and then moves away. I straighten.

"Someone doesn't like you," Ekaterina comments from beside me. I look at her. She's wearing that mischievous smile. Now I want to ask her all kinds of other questions because she seems to have that women's intuition, and I really want to know if she thinks Mira doesn't like me.

Instead of those questions, I turn fully to her and offer a tight smile.

"Would you like to take a stroll down to the bazaar?" I ask.

MIRA

"WHAT IS WITH YOU TODAY?" OKSANA ASKS AS WE PREPARE FOR DINNER. SINCE MORE OF THE ROYAL guests have begun arriving, the queen asked if Oksana could start preparing special treats for dinners. My friend is beyond thrilled. But it is more work, and I really should be getting back home soon if I'm to get any work done on those chores. Although, thanks to Yura, I know my stepfamily has been making friends with one of the traveling ambassadors. They're trying to get information on the prince, which means I'm at least safe from Feodora showing up unannounced.

Ugh, the prince—the ever-invading-my-thoughts, smiling, cat-loving flirt.

After I saw him making eyes at the ambassador's daughter, I nearly dropped the basket I'd been carrying. I have no idea why my body's response was so physical, and I don't want to know.

"Nothing. I was just thinking about"—definitely not the prince—"Feodora and her plans for the girls. I'm surprised she's settling for ambassadors, instead of the royal family."

"I'm not sure she's settling. Probably more like scheming."

"That does sound more like her. Well, she can take the prince in all his glory." I mumble that last part, but Oksana doesn't miss a thing. She stops, giving me a look, and stands still long enough for me to notice.

"What?"

"I don't know, there's something about you."

"I just don't understand how people can throw themselves at the mercies of others, men especially."

Oksana chuckles at that, but it's not unkind. It's more like she can't believe my thought process.

"You're telling me you wouldn't like a nice prince to sweep you off your feet?"

I nearly laugh out loud at that.

"The only thing I want from the royal family is a nice portal trip to the human realm," I reply, stacking cupcakes onto a tray.

"Oh, come on. You wouldn't change your plans?"

"I wouldn't compromise my dreams for anyone, least of all a man, especially one who is a spoiled prince."

My friend stops her work, turning to face me, one hand on her waist. I might've come off a little harsh, but it's too late to take it back now.

"I thought you liked the royal family?"

"Oh, I adore Queen Calista and would love to be even half as fierce as she is. And King Brendan has the biggest heart of anyone. But have you ever seen their son do, well, anything?"

Now I'm definitely being unfair because we've all seen the prince helping with setup. But my mind and mouth have a mind of their own, and I can't stop it.

"You really have your heart set on this." Oksana chuckles, getting back to work.

"*Da*, I do." Even more now that I've met the prince, and he keeps invading my thoughts. Oksana gives me another look. and it's my turn to laugh. "I'm only saying, no pretty face is going to sway me away from reaching my goals."

"There's some saying about protesting too much." Oksana *tsks*, but she doesn't push further. She also ignores the look I give her.

Truth be told, I'm confused about my own response to the prince. Seeing him today with that beautiful young woman was like a punch in the gut. I don't understand it because I don't even know the guy. I really need to get my hormones to calm down or Oksana will be saying 'I told you so' until the end of time.

When the clock strikes five, I make a run for it. I need to finish with the sitting room tonight. It's a feeling I can't shake, and thankfully, we have everything done for the day.

On my way home, there are no strange horsemen, but I keep my knife out and my footsteps hurried anyway. A part of me still thinks I might've hallucinated. I was pretty emotionally and physically spent, so it's possible. I suppose. But I'm not taking any chances either way.

The walk home does nothing to calm my over-imaginative mind. Everything seems to be on the verge of spinning out of control, and I'm not sure how to put each item on its appropriate shelf. When I step inside the house, I immediately pull out the journal I carry. Instead of making a list, my hand hovers over the pages for a moment.

Walking down to the kitchen, I make a fire and heat the meat and potato stew. When I finally sit down, the journal is open in front of me. I still don't make my usual lists. I just pick up a pen and write out the events of the last few days. I've never been much for keeping a diary, but for some reason, writing this down seems important. The words are fast and choppy, and they resemble a list of items anyway, but the more I write, the calmer I feel.

Maybe the process of writing it down is having the same effect as my lists do. They help me feel in control of an uncontrollable situation. This is something I do for myself, something Feodora has no control or say over. My stew is cold by the time I finish. I place it back on the stove as I ponder everything I wrote down.

There were a few too many mentions of the prince, but maybe I have purged him from my brain now and can get back to my regularly scheduled plan of events.

Either way, I'm done thinking about him for today. I need to eat and then I need to move some furniture around.

CHAPTER

TEN

LUCA

The outing with Ekaterina went well. She's a smart girl, quick on her feet, but she's not quick to give up her secrets. Then again, I suppose a smart person wouldn't be. But that means more time for us to spend together later. And more visiting daughters to woo.

This morning, I find myself in the fruit garden. One of the most wonderful aspects of these castle grounds are the gardens. While *Volshebnii Les,* the magical forest, surrounds us on every side, Mama nourished the gardens within these walls. The large courtyard, where the majority of the balls will be held, houses the ancient tree with ever-blossoming flowers. There are a number of other gardens around the property, too. The south corner is all flowers of every type and color. A small pathway weaves through the area, and a small fountain stands in the midst of it. The eastern side has the orchard. It has fruit trees galore, including oranges, apples, grapefruits, plums, and basically anything Mama could think of when she planted it. Apparently, the land itself helped nourish whatever Mama put into the ground, and she wanted to make sure both the people and the land were satisfied.

There are also a few smaller patches of trees and flowers throughout the upper and lower part of the palace. Mama and I both have our own gardens, but the orchard is where I stroll now. The large trees are comforting, somehow, and the smell of citrus is one of my favorites. I need to clear my head.

It's been too filled with a certain blonde-haired girl and the possibilities of an evil sorceress on the loose. I'm not exactly sure about the order those thoughts enter my mind, or why the girl goes first, but that makes me seem pretty selfish. I was selfish before, and it didn't end well, so I really cannot allow myself to be so now.

I am so lost in my thoughts that I don't even see her at first. My foot connects with something, and when I glance down, I've sent a basket full of oranges scattering. The girl crouching next to it stands. When she does, she slams right into me, sending us toppling over. I grab her around the waist, trying to keep us upright, but no luck. I land hard on my back with her on top of me. When I look up, I'm staring into Mira's blue eyes. She seems just as surprised to see me as I am to see her. There's a bit of electricity running through me at her nearness, making my skin buzz. Some of the hair escapes her messy braid, falling into her face. I reach a hand out, gently tucking the pesky strands behind her ear. Her skin is impossibly soft, and I think her heartbeat quickens to match mine. She inhales, her eyes growing wide, and I'm fascinated all over again. My hand around her waist flexes. That's when she finally seems to snap out of her daze.

"Oh." One syllable escapes her parted lips and then she's pushing back from me, trying to get to her feet. I get there first, offering a hand up, but she ignores it.

"I made a mess of things again," I say, trying to lighten the mood.

"You do that a lot," she replies, straightening her apron. She reaches for her hair, but then seems to think better of it and leaves it as is. She doesn't realize just how true her words are, but things I've been keeping buried far down below seem to spring up, and suddenly, I want to either run away or spill my guts to this near stranger.

I do neither.

"It's part of my charm," I say instead. She cocks her head to the side, narrowing her eyes like she doesn't believe me. She's not supposed to be looking this deeply.

"Not sure if charm is the word I would use," she says.

I gasp, placing a hand over my chest.

"That was a bullseye to the heart."

"You've got one of those?" This time, there's definitely a smile on those lips, and my own answer in kind. She's fun, and somehow, I think she doesn't allow herself to be so very often. I'm not sure why I make that observation, but it fits. I must've watched her for a little too long because her cheeks turn a little pink. I tear my gaze away. I really am not being charming at all. All I do around her is stumble over my feet, my words, my emotions.

"Are you any good with your hands?"

At first, I don't think I hear her right. She raises an eyebrow and looks down at my hands before meeting my eye again.

"Are you any good with your hands?"

"I'd like to think so." The words are out before I can stop them, and then there's a pause as the air crackles around us. She stares at me, her mouth slightly open. I'm overcome with the nearly undeniable desire to close what little space there is between us. But I do deny it and stay still, waiting her out. She clears her throat before reaching for the basket.

"How about you put them to good use and harvest those oranges?" There's that flash of amusement…and something else…in her eyes. It takes much of my self-control not to let my imagination run wild. She definitely inspires a very particular response from me, and I have no idea how to deal with it. Staying away would be the smart thing to do.

Acting on impulse has gotten me into a lot of trouble before. Trouble I'm still trying to process and recover from.

But I don't listen to any rational part of my brain. Instead, I take the basket and walk over to the orange tree before stepping up onto the stool and reaching for the closest fruit. Clearly, I'm losing my mind.

We work in silence for a few minutes, and I'd be lying if I said my eyes didn't wander over to her every few seconds. She's got this look of concentration on her face, total and complete focus. She takes a notebook from her apron pocket, opens it up, and jots down a few things. I noticed her with it a few times around the castle, and I can't help but ask.

"What are you always writing in there?"

She jerks, as if she had forgotten I was right there. I step down to place the now-full basket on the ground. She snaps the notebook closed before dropping it back into her apron.

"I make lists. To help me remember things."

"Do you have trouble remembering things?" Even before I finish asking the question, she's shaking her head.

"No, it mostly calms me—" She glances up, as if surprised she revealed something so personal. Her eyes narrow as she studies me. Maybe she's expecting more questions, or waiting for me to judge

her, but I do neither.

"That's how gardening is for me." Now I'm the one who's shocked, because I just revealed something incredibly personal. Something no one else knows. Besides my parents.

"Gardening?"

"It's not really gardening. But—we don't have to talk about this."

"But I want to talk about this."

The way she says that makes me pause. I meet her eyes, and there's such genuine curiosity there that I suddenly want to tell her about it.

"It's not really gardening, but I've been growing different herbs from seeds. I'm not sure why it's so soothing to work with the soil and try to figure out the best conditions, but I—" I pause, running a hand through my hair as I shrug. "It's a hobby of mine."

When she doesn't immediately respond, I peek at her from beneath my eyelashes and find her gaze still on me. It feels almost like she's seeing me for the first time. For a second, I thought I'd bored her by even mentioning it. But then she smiles, and I think I want to see that smile every day.

"I understand," is all she says. Then the guys are there to pick up the fruit baskets, and she gets pulled away. I realize I've never told anyone about my secret garden, but now I want to show it to her as well.

MIRA

My small interaction with the prince has stayed with me all day. He truly is such a contradiction. Anytime I've ever heard gossip about him, it has always revolved around his nonchalant approach to life. I wouldn't call him a playboy, although I have seen him go from one visiting young lady to the next in the past two days. He doesn't have any friends as far as I know, and he just floats from one place to the next. It's like he doesn't seem to take anything seriously.

Except for his herb garden, apparently.

Who even has an herb garden? It's such a strange hobby for a prince. What kind of a thing is that to say? I am baffled, to say the least.

When I step inside the kitchen, after helping one of the ladies put up curtains in the room next to the courtyard, I am grabbed from the side.

"Ouch, Oksana, what—"

"Where have you been?" My friend is nearly panicked.

"What? Why?"

"You have to get home. Right now. Feodora is on her way. Sasha came by about fifteen minutes ago, saying she arranged for a carriage for after dinner."

The floor seems to drop out from below me, and every horrible scenario rushes through my head. It hasn't even been a week. I'm not ready. This is not good. If she finds out I've been gone, and the chores are not done—

Nyet. I squeeze my eyes tightly for half a second, pulling all those emotions back and shutting them down. I don't have time to panic.

"*Spasibo*!" I shout at Oksana as I squeeze her hand and dash out of the kitchens, grabbing my bag

on the way. It is midday, so that gives me a good three hours before dinner and maybe another hour after. It's not enough time for anything, and I can't exactly rely on the information Sasha gave Oksana because Feodora is unpredictable.

My only saving grace is that I planned for this.

Yes, Mira, you planned for this. It's why you stopped by and bought the bucket of paint and left it outside the gates, in case Feodora beats you home. It's why you started on the chores and haven't slept more than two hours a night.

Okay, the self-talk helps a little. But not all that much because if I miscalculate even one aspect of this, it can come crumbling down like a house made out of cookies. Or whatever metaphor people use. If I can't even think straight enough for a correct metaphor, how am I supposed to get home on time?

I'll have to run. I don't have a carriage on call, and Feodora would find out if I ordered one. How? I have no idea, but she would. I wish I had a horse. That would be helpful right about now.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I don't even notice someone turning the corner in front of me until I'm slamming right into him. Arms and legs go flying as I stumble back and then I'm pitching forward. A strong hand wraps around my waist. Now I'm being spun around with the momentum, stopping only when my back hits the wall. I'm caged between the wall and…the prince.

My face hovers so closely to his that I can see every fleck of gold in his green eyes. His hand flexes on my back and that small movement brings our bodies even closer. I can't seem to look away from him. When his other hand comes up to push the hair out of my face, I finally snap back to reality.

I stand up straighter, hoping he realizes that means he needs to move, but he doesn't.

"We keep meeting like this."

"You should watch where you're going," I say, even though I know it's my fault. His eyebrows raise, and I sigh. "Okay, I'm sorry. I should watch where I'm going. And be going I must."

"What's the rush?" He still hasn't moved.

I don't like how my body reacts to his proximity. It wants to stay here. It wants to do a lot of things.

"I have somewhere to be," I say as nicely as possible. Yelling at the prince in a near panic is not going to earn me any points. "Please let me leave."

Something flashes in his gaze at my words, and it looks almost like protectiveness. But I must be imagining things. Why would he feel protective of me?

"You haven't moved."

"Do you really have to go?" His question is but a whisper that caresses my cheek, but the panic in my chest grows the longer I stand here.

"*Da*! Just move already!"

Luca lets go immediately, taking a step back. A flash of hurt crosses his features before his princely mask comes back down again. He was just kidding, and I'm not being fair because he doesn't know, but I can't seem to deal with the conflicting emotions of wanting to stay just as we were and flee as fast as I can.

"*Izveni menya*," I mumble, before I push past him and race out into the streets. I don't turn to look, but I feel his gaze on me. My quick apology doesn't sit well with me, but it's all I can offer him right now. He doesn't understand. He wouldn't understand even if I tried to explain it to him. He and I are from two different worlds. It has never been more evident than in this exact moment. Right now, I just hope I can make it home fast enough to keep my world from exploding around me.

At dawn the rider passes,
Clad all in white.
He brings the morning sunlight,
While birds take on their flight.

At noon the rider passes,
Clad all in red.
He heralds the midday coming,
The work that must not be delayed.

As sun dips past horizon,
The rider clad in black
Steals light from forest yonder,
Brings night to day's end.

The three ride on their horses,
Dressed in the colors of the day.
They watch the path a traveler takes,
And keep the prophecy at bay.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN

LUCA

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Mama's voice comes from behind me, and I'm not even surprised she's come to find me. I'm in the small side garden, the one nestled near my room, which has no other entry or exit. It's my own private connection to the land, and where I keep my herb garden. I came here after Mira ran out as if her skirts were on fire. I can't figure out what I did to cause her to rush out like that. Technically, she was already in a hurry, but still. I feel like maybe I'm at fault here.

"I'm not sure I'm ready, Mama," I say, grabbing a rag and wiping my hands as I turn to face her. I know she's my mother, but I'm never not in awe of her, especially when she wears her royal clothing like she does now. Her dress is deep maroon and it flares out around her, grazing the floor. She's wearing her royal cape, maroon to match her dress, with traditional golden flower designs and a furry collar. She looks intimidating and approachable all at once. It's something only she can pull off.

"You were quiet at dinner, and you went straight for your garden," she comments, coming farther in.

I turn to study the plants so I don't see her studying me. We've been here before, and I'm sure we'll be here again. She comments on things she's noticed, but she won't push me to spill my thoughts. When I don't take the bait, she looks up, giving me a smile.

"Devra and Ruslan won't be back at the castle by first ball. They might be gone during the whole of the celebration," she says, and I nod.

"I don't know why you send the captain of your guard out when she should be here, guarding you."

"We both know I can take care of myself, and I need Devra to have firsthand experience with what's going on out there. I trust her. And Rus."

Mama often sends them out to scout the land, to see where help is needed, and to look out for any dangers. She also often goes herself, but technically, no one is supposed to know that. She dresses in her human realm clothes and sneaks right under the radar. It's where I learned to do that.

But any mention of Ruslan always brings a certain kind of pain to my heart, and right now, I can't seem to push it aside. He's a constant reminder of his brother, my best friend, once upon a time.

"Oh, *moi milii malish*." Mama is beside me in a flash, her arms reaching for me. "I'm sorry."

She guides me to a bench near the trees, and I turn my head into her shoulder as she holds me. I've been carrying this pain and guilt for years, and sometimes, it overwhelms me.

"It's just been a day, Mama. That's all. I'm okay." I pull back, taking a deep breath. She raises my chin so I can look her in the eye. Part of me simply wants to be her little boy and stay in her embrace

for the rest of the night. She has chased away every monster I've ever come across, except those inside of me.

"I know you miss your friend and feel guilty, but you can't keep yourself so closed off that you don't let anyone else in."

"What do you mean? I have friends." But even as I say it, I know it's not true. I'm friendly with everyone, but I don't let anyone in past a certain point. It's safer that way, for all parties involved.

But then my mind goes to Mira and how I told her about my garden today. I have no idea what possessed me to blurt it out. What is it about her that pushes all my boundaries? We've only had a handful of conversations, and yet, I can't help but feel a pull toward her.

"Do you think—" I begin before I clear my throat. "Do you think it's possible to find what you're looking for, even when you don't know what that is specifically, in unlikely places?"

I don't think my question makes sense, but Mama studies me carefully. Her eyes are filled with the kind of wisdom I wish to one day possess.

"I think we find what we need, even when we're not looking for it, as long as we stay true to who we are and what we believe."

It's such a Queen Calista answer, but it's also my mama through and through. Mira has really got my head in a mess, and I need to concentrate on helping Mama figure out if Baba Yaga is back, and how I can be a ruler when my time comes. It really shouldn't bother me so much that a girl I've only spoken to a few times might've been offended by something I did.

I should've stepped back. I should've let go immediately. But I simply couldn't bring myself to do so, and I have no idea what to do with that information. Besides not sharing it with Mama. At least not yet. I want to be able to understand my own emotions, and that's not exactly easy.

I hope Mira's okay. I hope whatever she was rushing to wasn't an emergency. And yes, in the back of my mind, I also hope I see her tomorrow.

MIRA

THE SUN IS SETTING BY THE TIME I MAKE IT TO THE HOUSE. WHEN I'M NEARLY TO THE GATES, I HEAR the sound of horse hooves on gravel, and I think I'm a goner. But when I look behind me, there's no carriage there. The sound is still there, so I study the forest around me. That's when I see him. The white rider on a white horse. There and gone. I turn to walk back to the house and the sound comes again. There's the red rider on a red horse.

I stop in my tracks, watching him disappear into the trees, and then I wait. I can't be having the same hallucination more than once so it must be…real. Not even a minute later, the black rider on the black horse crosses the road in front of me. Just like before, he looks at me. I can't see anything past the dark hood, but I can feel his gaze on me.

And then he's gone.

My whole body shakes from my earlier running, and the fear of Feodora. And now, it shakes because of this…mystery. What is going on around here?

Honestly, I don't have time to dwell on that right now. Rushing inside, I change my clothes, hiding the dress I was given to wear at the palace. Then, I light the fires in the kitchen and the sitting room,

where most of the furniture has been rearranged. Grabbing a bucket and a rag, I get down on my hands and knees and start working on the baseboards.

My mind keeps shifting between worry about Feodora, to the mysterious horsemen outside, to the prince. I was most certainly rude to him today. I'm always prickly around him—his word, not mine—but this was new.

He was… Actually, I don't know what he was doing. It felt like he was—*nyet*, he was definitely not flirting. My body thought he was, it still thinks he was. I really need to get a grip on these conflicting emotions. And I need to be more careful around him. That's twice now I've ended up pressed against his body.

And what a sturdy body it is.

Okay, I truly need to knock it off.

I'm almost ready to berate myself out loud when I hear the gates being pulled open and then the sound of the carriage. My heart beats loudly in my chest, but I don't get off the floor. Not yet.

"Mira! Where are you?" Feodora's voice echoes through the house.

I stand from where I've been crouched behind the couch. Feodora stands at the entrance, her eyes zeroing in on me.

"There you are, girl. I see you have made little progress on the rearranging."

"Yes, Stepmother. The furniture is heavy, and I must be careful in moving it so as not to scratch the floors."

"Don't give me excuses, girl. Just get it done. Not right now," she hurries on to say as I get ready to crouch back down. "Help the girls pack a few more outfits. We've been seeing so many people, we need some fresh clothes for receiving visitors. Oh, and help that man bring the dirty clothes in."

She doesn't wait to see if I follow instructions. She just turns and walks toward her office. Dropping the rag, I head toward the front door. The girls are just coming in, chattering away.

"Oh my goodness, Mira. You smell like a swamp. Haven't you even showered since we've been gone?" Agrippina exclaims. Galina crinkles her nose. I step to the side, letting them pass. I wonder if I truly do smell as bad as they say. The thought horrifies me, considering the prince was mere centimeters from me earlier today.

Ugh, why am I thinking about that rich, distracting, handsome guy again? Okay, I'm pretty sure my brain stopped working there for a moment because those were supposed to be insults. Shaking my head, I walk over to the carriage just as the driver pulls out two bags full of clothes.

"Good evening, Miss," he says, inclining his head. Then he heads out. I didn't even know they brought so many things with them. It's a lot of laundry for me to do.

"Mira! Where are you? I can't find my yellow sweater."

"What do you need a sweater for? It's not even cold out," Galina calls back. I hear a thud next and then a yelp.

"It's for my outfit, you ninny. Don't argue with fashion."

I chuckle to myself as I make my way back into the house just as Feodora is coming out again.

"Where are you going?" I ask before I can stop myself. The woman gives me such a hard look, I nearly shrink into myself.

"Never mind that. Make sure the girls are packed and ready to go by the morning."

"You'll be staying the night?"

This time when Feodora looks at me, there's definitely more suspicion there than before.

I quickly hurry to add, "Then I'll draw baths for the girls and for you too?"

She narrows her eyes but doesn't comment, pulling on a glove.

“I’ll be back soon and then you can draw one for me.” She turns and steps out of the house. I don’t ask any more questions. So far, so good. Now I just need to get through the night and figure out how in the world I will be at the palace tomorrow if I have these three to contend with first thing in the morning. For now, I take the bags of clothes to the back of the house. There’s no way I’m sleeping before I get these washed. It’s going to be a long night.

CHAPTER

TWELVE

MIRA

By the time Feodora returns, I've already packed for their return to the inn, bathed the girls, and washed all their clothes. It's past midnight, and now I'm too tired to do any of the other chores, so I simply go to bed.

The next morning, I make breakfast, letting them eat some of it before I bring up my idea on how to get to town sooner rather than later.

"Stepmother, would it be okay if I ride back into town with you today? I'd like to buy some paint for the garden wall."

The woman looks up at me, her gaze hard and hot on me. It's like I've offended her with my very presence. I have no idea where she went last night, but she wasn't exactly happy when she came back.

"Don't think you will be taking the carriage back," Feodora says.

"We need help with our bags, too," Agrippina says.

I simply nod and go and get my bag. I didn't have a chance to wash the dress from yesterday, so it'll have to do. I'll just keep to the kitchens for the day.

I perch at the back of the carriage all the way into town, trying to keep my heart from racing with worry. I'm already so much later than I normally am. Oksana is most likely worried.

When we reach the inn they're staying at, I make sure to carry all the bags inside. Meanwhile, Feodora makes a big deal about talking to people in the lobby. She looks like she's holding court or receiving guests, as if it's her own house.

"Will there be anything else?" I ask when everything has been carried up.

"No, you may go." She gives me a very hard look, the one that tells me without words that she's watching me. Gulping, I give her a little half bow before I leave.

My first stop is the paint shop, even though I already purchased paint. I have to buy more, in case she decides to ask around. For someone who hates me, she's always concerned with what I'm up to. It's unnerving.

When I finally reach the castle, I'm way later than I should be. I step inside the kitchen, storing the paint by the door and just like yesterday, I'm immediately grabbed. Except this time in a hug.

"Oh my stars, Mira. I've been so worried," Oksana says. I squeeze her back before stepping away.

"They stayed the night."

"But they don't know?"

"As far as I know." I shrug, incredibly exhausted on every level. "I need to change." I point to my

clothes and Oksana nods. I step back out into the hall, but when I reach the closest bathroom, it's busy. And there's already someone else waiting. When I check the other bathroom, there's someone there as well.

That's when I realize there are a lot more people here than before. That makes sense, considering the first ball, the official beginning of the celebration, is in two days. Well, the day after tomorrow.

I'm heading back to the kitchen when I realize I can't wait. Taking the stairs at the side, I head toward a bathroom on the second floor. Technically, I'm not supposed to be up here, but I helped one of the staff members carry items up here the other day, and I know there's a bathroom near the stairs. There are fewer people up here, and I take a second to relax as I change into the dress. Pulling my hair back into a braid, I look down at my outfit and sigh. It's a little dirty after the whole day of work yesterday, but it'll do.

When I step out of the bathroom, I nearly collide with someone.

"This has become a habit," the voice says. I glance up at the prince.

Luca. The prince. Ugh.

I need to get over my hiccup and call him by his name. At least in my mind. Maybe it'll help separate all these weird feelings I'm experiencing.

"What? No retort?"

That makes me raise an eyebrow. He seems to be in a mood just like I am, so fine. I'm too tired for this right now.

"I've said all I have to say to you, now if you'll excuse me."

I move past him, but at the last moment, his hand comes up to my upper arm. Now, he spins us right through an open doorway before he shuts the door behind him, leaning against it.

"What are you doing?"

"I think we need to talk."

"We don't," I reply, trying to keep my temper at bay. He unsettles me, and I have a tendency to simply blurt things out when I'm around him. I know I'm going to say something I'll regret.

"I understand I may have overstepped my bounds yesterday, and I apologize," he says. He completely ignores my earlier words, and I look at him in surprise. I was the one who was rude, and I say so.

"I was out of line. I have no right to talk to you like that. Regardless of the circumstances."

"You can talk to me however you see fit," he says. This time, I look at him and hold his gaze. "I just didn't want you to think I was trying to cause trouble in any way. Obviously, I didn't know where you were going, but still I—"

"Not everything is about you," I say quietly, but he hears me anyway. My mouth must be possessed by the guardians of the forest because why am I talking at all right now? I need to let him say his piece so I can leave.

"Is that what you think?" His question surprises me, but he looks like he really wants me to answer.

"Do you really want to know?"

"*Da*."

I sigh, my heart thumping in my ears as I look at this handsome boy, who seems to have no clue about the outside world. Somehow, the words come before I can stop them, driven by some unseen force.

"You assumed yesterday had to do with you because why wouldn't you? You're the prince. Everyone talks about you, everyone either wants to be you or be with you."

He shifts just a tiny bit closer at that, and now I can't seem to look away from his captivating gaze.

Doing my best to ignore it, I continue. "But the world out there is not as perfect as it is within these walls. You can sit up in your fancy castle with your fancy clothes and overflowing plates of food and have sympathy toward the less fortunate, but pretending to be a commoner for a day and giving a few people a coin or two isn't going to change anything."

It's not fair for me to be angry with him, but I can't help it. I look away, trying to find some reason why I felt inclined to say all that. But then he speaks.

"It's a start, isn't it?"

His soft words—where I expected anger—stop me in my tracks. Glancing up, I meet his gaze, so full of emotion it nearly overwhelms me.

"I want to be a good king when the time comes. I want to rule like my mama with a kind heart and a warrior's spirit. Is it so wrong of me to keep trying until I get it right?"

He disarms me completely. The space between us seems to be filled with enough sparks to set the Skazka forest on fire. It has taken all the oxygen from the room. Luca's gaze is unwavering and full of the vulnerability I never would've expected from someone like him. Yet, when it comes to the crown prince of *Zelenovo Korolevstva*, I seem to be wrong on every level. So focused on myself and my own ideas about the world, I misjudged him. Not for the first time.

But he's still here.

He hasn't held that against me. If that doesn't show his character to me, then I don't know what ever will. But trusting someone to be true to who they say they are? That is the hardest lesson to learn and not something I'm good at.

Somehow, we've moved even closer to each other. I have to break eye contact, or I'll be lost in that gaze forever. I turn toward the window, glancing out over the garden and farther down into the city. I wonder if there's more to the prince than I originally thought. Voices sound somewhere in the hallway, but I'm too lost in my thoughts to register them immediately.

Then, suddenly, two hands grip my shoulders from behind. I'm being spun again, but this time right into a closet, the door shutting swiftly behind us.

LUCA

I DEFINITELY DIDN'T THINK THIS THROUGH. WHEN I GRABBED MIRA AND PULLED HER INTO THE CLOSET, I just wanted to keep her from getting into trouble. If it was my parents, we would've been fine. But anyone on the housing staff is a little stricter about the rules. The worst would be all the gossip. I wouldn't want to put Mira through that.

Her body is barely half a dozen centimeters from my own. If I breathe in a little too deeply, we'll touch. My fingers tingle from where I grazed her skin.

"Why—" Mira whispers, and I clamp my hand over her mouth. The shock in her eyes is instantaneous, coupled with annoyance at being hushed. This is not something I've done with anyone, ever, but then I hear Miss Sofia's, the palace gossip's, voice. She's the worst person it could be if Mira and I are discovered. Especially now that I put us in a closet together. Maybe not the smartest

move.

Mira continues glaring daggers at me, and I have to be honest, I couldn't look away from her even if my life depended on it. The colors in her eyes dance as her emotions rise. There's something absolutely breathtaking about it. She raises an eyebrow, staring me down. Even that is appealing.

When she bites my hand gently, I yank my hand back in surprise.

"What was that for?" I ask, keeping my voice as low as absolutely possible. As far as I can tell, Miss Sofia moved to the other side of the room, but I'm not about to take any chances.

"For muzzling me like some—something. I can't think of anything that actually should be muzzled right now."

If I thought she was annoyed with me before, she is much more now. Her breathing is a little shallow. When she takes a breath, her chest grazes my own. Her hand comes up, almost as if of its own accord, pushing me back just slightly. Her fingers touch right at the opening of my shirt. I think all coherent thought flies right out of my mind then. Everything zeroes in on this one tiny spot where the top of her finger rests against my skin. Goosebumps start at the center of her touch, spreading out like sunbeams, making my whole body aware of…well, everything.

She stares up at me and something changes in her gaze. It's like she's as affected as I am.

We've been bickering for days, literally running into each other, and while I've always found her attractive, I never allowed myself a second to entertain what it would be like to actually cross the invisible line we've drawn. But now, that's all I can think about. A small movement, just a shift in the way we stand, and I could taste those lips for myself.

My hand seems to have a mind of its own as it falls to her waist. I don't move her closer. I don't dare move at all. She stands just as frozen as I am, and the weight of my hand on her hip becomes an anchor.

A million possibilities and desires rush through me. Everything in me screams to ask her if I can, to utter the question to see if the answer is yes.

"I think she's gone." Mira's breathless voice slams me back down to earth. Her tone mirrors the battle inside of me. I memorize everything about this moment before it's gone.

"You think?" I ask, still not moving. She stares up at me, and for just a second, I think she's going to say something else. But then she nods and removes her hand from my chest.

I miss her touch immediately and then berate myself for becoming such a softy over nothing. This is nothing. I have to remind myself of that or I won't ever recover.

What is wrong with me?

Mira is oblivious to the battle raging inside me, and I'm not about to let her see how undone I've become because of a simple touch. I shift a little, looking through the crack in the door. I have no idea how long Miss Sofia has been gone, but the room is empty.

Still, I don't want to leave this tiny space I'm sharing with the girl who's been driving me crazy for days. But I can't hold her captive here, and I need to get solid ground back under my feet.

So, I push the door open and motion for her to step out first.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN

MIRA

I bolted straight out of that closet and down the stairs, and I've been hiding in the kitchen all day. When it's time to wrap it up for the evening, I leave Oksana with Yura and head out to use the bathroom before I leave.

After I'm done, I head for the courtyard. I tell myself I'm not looking for him, but a part of me is. I've come to expect him to pop up anywhere I am. But I'm also drawn to this tree, and I can't explain it. When I step into the quiet courtyard, a smile blossoms on my face, much like the ever-blossoming flowers on the branches.

There's something about this tree that touches those parts of my heart that I've kept buried. As I walk closer, watching the petals glow in the low light of the evening, I think it's because Mama would've loved this tree. It's something we could've studied together, something that would've been our own.

When I come around the trunk, I freeze. The Queen of *Zelenovo Korolevstva* is sitting on the small bench near the trunk, her own eyes on the flowers above her head. She turns to me as she meets my eyes, a kind smile on her face.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know anyone was here, Your Majesty."

"Don't you worry about it, and please call me Calista."

I could never imagine doing that. The woman is even more beautiful up close. Her hair is past her waist, brown and full with tiny flecks of purple woven in. I would love color like that in my hair. I would choose purple or turquoise for myself. Her eyes are large and green, much like her son's, framed by long eyelashes. She's dressed in a dark shirt, dark pants, knee-high boots, and has two sheaths strapped to her thighs for easy access to knives. She looks like everything I would ever want to be. Powerful, confident, her own woman.

I probably look like an idiot, gaping at her. She seems to read my mind, and she smiles bigger before motioning me forward.

"Come, sit with me."

I don't think I could refuse even if I tried to. Taking a seat beside her, I watch her rearrange herself so she faces me but can still see the rest of the courtyard too. I definitely didn't surprise her by showing up. She saw me coming.

"You like this tree?"

"I'm a little obsessed with it," I reply honestly, which earns me a chuckle from the queen.

"Don't tell anyone, but I am also a little obsessed with it." She leans toward me as she speaks,

like she's sharing a secret.

"Can you—would you tell me about it?" The question is out before I can stop it, but somehow, I don't think I've overstepped my boundaries. She seems glad to talk about it.

"It was a gift from Skazka itself." I must give her a strange look. She chuckles again. "I know how it sounds. And trust me, I was in your shoes once upon a time as well."

I highly doubt that, but I don't comment. Her voice has a melodic lilt to it, and I think it's just her in general. When she talks, people want to listen. Not because she's intimidated them into doing so, but because there's passion in every word she speaks.

"I'm sure you've heard of my not-so-great conquest of Baba Yaga," she says.

I shake my head in confusion. "I've heard you overcame your own ancestors' magic to defeat her." I try to keep my features schooled at the mention of magic. I have no idea if I'll ever stop being skeptical when it comes to it, but I don't want to offend the queen.

She narrows her eyes at my words, her gaze turning inquisitive.

"You don't believe in magic?"

I'm not sure how she caught on to that so fast, but I fidget a little after that question.

"It's not that I don't believe in it. It's that it has never done much for me, so I don't place it on a shelf of importance in my life."

She nods at that, and I honestly think she understands what I mean.

"Magic has always been in my blood, but I didn't know about it for a time. And then, when I remembered I had it, I truly didn't know where it came from or what kind of destiny it wrote for me. I chose my own way with the help of the best people I know, and Skazka rewarded me in the end. But Skazka herself holds so much more power than we can imagine."

"Fairies, fairy godmothers, and curses and such?" I smile, and she laughs.

"Ah, yes. Fairy godmothers. Those are always fun to meet. They have a view of the world that's quite different from ours."

I look at her a little strangely because I've never actually met anyone who has talked about fairy godmothers as real beings.

"You don't believe in fairy godmothers?" This woman can read me like a book. Sudden and fierce sadness enters my heart and tears pool in my eyes as I think of the stories Mama told me. There was a time, before I stopped believing, when I still asked for things.

"I'm not sure." I decide to be completely honest. "I think if they were real—maybe—they would have granted me the wish that my parents wouldn't be dead."

"Oh, sweetheart." Queen Calista reaches out, placing her hand over mine. "I am so sorry for your loss. The way of magic is a mystery. Even to me. I could never tell you why those wishes didn't come true."

"But?" I feel like there's a but.

Queen Calista smiles. "But life is a beautiful and terrible thing, all on its own. We may never understand why we are given the burdens we carry. But I know that a heart as strong and kind as yours can find her own magic, even if it's a little different from what you expected."

Her words burrow into that hollow space inside of me, the place where I keep all the lessons my parents would've taught me. It feels a little less empty now.

"You don't even know me. Your Majesty," I hurry on to add. She gives my hand another quick squeeze.

"I don't need to know much to see the kind of person you are. I've seen you around the palace this last week, the kindness you show those around you, the way you work hard, Miraslava." She chuckles

at my look of disbelief. “I know the people working under my roof, and I try to get to know those I come in contact with. I didn’t know your parents well. I remember your father’s kindness the most—you look like him—but I can see that they raised a wonderful daughter.”

This time, I don’t fight the tears as I look at the queen of our kingdom. She has shown me more kindness than anyone I have ever met, besides Oksana’s family, and it gives me a particular sort of hope for the future.

“I would—I would love to hear about them one day. The way you knew them, if you remember anything,” I whisper.

Queen Calista reaches over to place a hand against my cheek in a gesture so motherly I think I’m about to lose all my senses and start bawling right on her lap. I’m so desperate for any glimpses of my parents, I’ll take any scraps I can find. But the queen doesn’t seem to think anything of it.

“I will tell you about them, sweetheart.”

THE NEXT MORNING, I’M THE MOST EXHAUSTED I’VE EVER BEEN WITH A MESH OF EMOTIONS AND desires I’ve never allowed myself before. Between Luca and the conversation with the queen herself, I don’t think my heart can handle any more surprises. It’s close to ten in the morning when Sasha bursts into the kitchen, making a beeline straight for us.

“What is it?” I ask, terrified it’s about Feodora.

“Sorry miss, it’s for Miss Oksana. Her mother has asked her to come help at the bakery. It’s pretty urgent.”

My friend and I exchange a look, thank the messenger, and then head for the door. Oksana stops long enough to give the girl in charge some instructions and tell her we’ll be back before the end of the day, if possible, and then we’re gone.

When Oksana and I step inside the kitchen at the bakery, her ma breathes out a sigh of relief.

“Oh, my dears, thank you for being here. I know you have lots of work, but—”

“Ma, it’s okay.” Oksana hurries over, giving her mama a hug. “Why didn’t you tell us sooner?” Oksana asks as I reach for a barrel of flour and roll it toward the counter.

“Because I was absolutely fine until this morning,” Tetia Rosa replies, pulling more baking sheets out of the oven. “Oh, Mira, sweetheart, can you go man the front, please? And send Lubov back here. It’ll be much faster.”

I nod and hurry to the front. Oksana’s sister is at the register, and the room is filled with people. The bakery has always been busy, but this is another level. Lubov looks a little overwhelmed as I hurry over to her.

“Go help your ma in the back. I got this,” I tell her.

She hugs me quick around the waist and dashes to the back. Taking a deep breath, I turn to the man on the other side of the counter.

“This is supposed to be the best bakery in this kingdom, but the service is terrible enough that I’m about to leave!” He grumbles, and I give him a kind smile.

“I am sorry for the wait, sir,” I say, keeping my voice calm. “As you can imagine, such a rush of people can be overwhelming to a small business, especially since every baked good is made fresh. You can understand an oven can’t be rushed.”

"No one would want that." A man behind the first chuckles and the first man nods.

"It's true. I've been to bakeries where such care isn't taken by their staff. We get half-baked or over-baked goods!"

As the few people by the register talk about their past experiences with bakeries, I listen and take their orders. I learned a long time ago, most customers just want to be heard and acknowledged. It's the easiest thing to do, and yet, it can also feel impossible when you're getting yelled at. Poor Lubov just didn't know what to say to get them calm, but she'll learn. Especially as she grows and gets a little more out of her shell.

Oksana rushes in with a fresh tray, and I distribute the items into paper bags before I hand them off to the customers. The smell of Oksana's *pierogis* fills the air, and even that works its magic on the people inside.

We move in sync throughout the afternoon, and soon, every customer is satisfied. The crowd eventually disperses.

"That was something," Tetia Rosa says, stepping out from the kitchen to give the room a quick study.

"I think we made more in this one day than we have in a month," my friend comments. I grin. She deserves this.

Oksana and I lean against the counter, both of us tired from the day. Rushing around the castle and then rushing around here can take its toll on anyone. And I still have more chores to do at the house.

"I should get going," I say, straightening.

"Oh, at least stay and eat supper with us," Oksana says. "It's the least we can do."

"You've done more than enough for me already," I reply. "But I'll grab a roll if it makes you happy."

"It would make me happy if you didn't have to go back to that house at all."

I smile but don't comment. Even with all the work Feodora left, it's been kind of nice having the house to myself. I can feel my parents' presence a little more fully that way.

Oksana puts a few items into a bag for me. Just as I'm about to take it, I hear a commotion coming from outside. Looking through the window, I don't hesitate to drop my bag and rush out there.

"Are you all right?" I crouch down near an elderly woman, who was nearly run over by a carriage going by way too fast. Her groceries are spilled around her, and after I help her to her feet, I reach for the runaway vegetables.

"Thank you, *dorogaya devochka*," the woman says as I pick up her things. She doesn't look as old as I first thought. She's also adorned in finer clothing than it looked like at first glance. I blink and then her clothes are a little dirtier all of a sudden. My tired brain must be playing tricks on me.

"Would you like to sit down? I'm not sure how that carriage didn't see you." I lead her to one of the benches in front of Oksana's bakery, and the woman takes a seat.

"You know how these things are. People simply don't pay attention to anyone but themselves," the woman says, studying me. I shrug a little in response.

"People tend to carry a lot on their shoulders," I say, and the woman smiles.

"Always such a kind heart."

The comment throws me off balance a little. She speaks as if she knows me, but I'm sure I've never seen her before.

"Tell me, sweet girl, why did you rush out here so quickly?" the woman asks before I can think much further on her earlier comment. But now I'm simply confused.

"Because I saw you fall down." I'm not exactly sure what she's asking.

"I did. But there were others already around me. Yet you, coming from inside the bakery, reached me first."

I glance over her shoulder at Oksana, who initially followed me out of the bakery. She looks just as confused as I am.

"It was an automatic reaction. I didn't really think about it," I say carefully. "I think it's something my parents instilled in me from an early age. To treat others like you'd want to be treated. And if I was nearly run over, I would've appreciated the help."

The woman is quiet for a moment before she smiles.

"See, in my many years in this land, I have learned that most people are out for their own benefit. They would walk on by instead of helping an old lady, because they might be late if they stop. Or perhaps the lady looks like she hasn't showered in a few weeks, and they would not want to catch any diseases. But you didn't even blink an eye."

I still don't understand why we're having this conversation. It seems so simple to me, to help—to act. But she's looking at me as if I have given her a gift of sorts.

"I can see that I have confused you with the ramblings of an old woman." She smiles again, and I shake my head.

"It's quite all right," I say, and she reaches over to pat my hand with hers. "Would you like me to help you to your home?" I ask, but she's already shaking her head.

"No, Miraslava, I would like to help you with something else."

My eyes grow round at the use of my name. I glance at Oksana as she steps closer.

"Do I know you?" I ask.

The woman shakes her head. "No, sweet *devochka*. But I know you. I was the one who gave your mama that necklace you wear close to your heart."

My hand reaches for it before I can stop it, shock coursing through my veins.

"Mama said that it was a blessing given to her by someone very powerful," I say slowly. The woman nods.

"It was a blessing and a gift, and it was meant for you as much as it was for your mama. Now, I have another to give you."

"Another necklace?"

"No, *devochka*. Another gift." Then, the woman reaches into her bag, the same one I put her groceries in, and pulls out a pair of golden shoes. They sparkle in the setting sun. They're shaped like slippers with tiny wedge heels at the back.

"These are for you to wear to the ball."

"I can't accept these," I say, leaning away from them as she pushes them toward me.

"Of course you can. It is polite to accept a kindness after a kindness has been given."

"But I only helped you pick up a few things off the ground. These shoes look like they're worth a fortune."

I could never wear something like those slippers, but oh my goodness do I want to. The woman seems to read my mind, smiling brightly.

"These are magical slippers, *devochka*."

"Magic?"

"Yes. Wear them to the ball. They will keep you hidden from the prying eyes of those who wish you harm. But make sure you are gone by midnight every time, for the magic rests in the shadows of the night."

She places the slippers on my lap before she stands and turns to my best friend.

“Make sure to get her to that ball, Oksana,” the woman says, shocking us all over again. “Remind her of the power of magic.”

A loud noise comes from down the alleyway, making me jump. When I turn back to the woman, I find her gone.

“Where did she go?” I ask.

“I don’t know! I turned away for a second, and she was gone. Oh my goodness, Mira! Do you think she was a fairy godmother?”

“Oksana, they don’t exist.”

“*Pssh*, don’t say such things. She gave you magical slippers!”

I glance down at the most beautiful shoes I have ever seen.

“I don’t understand any of this,” I mumble.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN

MIRA

"Will you stop fidgeting?" Oksana asks for about the tenth time. It's the night of the first ball, and she talked me into going. But I can't help the fidgeting. This whole makeover idea of hers is making my insides tremble.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I mumble, and get a finger pointed at my face.

"You are absolutely not getting sick. Now close your eyes."

I do as I'm told and feel a cooling sensation over my eyelids as Oksana paints them. She put curlers in my hair, something I haven't done since I was a child. And back then, it was my mama who did it for me. She loved curling my hair and pinning it back with bows bigger than my head. Thankfully, my eyes are closed, or I'd be fighting tears again.

Not for the first time, I think of how much Mama would've loved all of this. And how much I would've loved for her to be the one getting me ready. But as I open my eyes when I'm told, I realize how blessed I am to have been given a friend as wonderful as Oksana. She has been my lifeline to the world outside my present home life, and now she's getting me ready for a ball.

"There," Oksana says, standing back and admiring her handiwork. "Take a look."

I turn to the mirror behind me, and nearly gasp. Oksana painted silver and purple around my eyes, winging the paint up into my hair. She also drew vines going down my right cheek and up my left temple. After years of decorating cakes, her lines are precise and beautiful.

"The mask will go over it, but it's nearly sheer," my friend says, "so this way, you're double covered."

"I don't even look like me."

"That is the point of a masquerade ball," Oksana's sister comments as she steps into the room. I glance at her in the mirror, and when her eyes meet mine, they grow bigger.

"Okay, but that looks extra cool."

"Well, now that it's been approved by you…" Oksana chuckles, reaching for whatever Lubov brought with her. I'm still staring at myself in the mirror.

My eyebrows are filled in and a little darker than I've ever worn them, somehow blending in with the paint perfectly. My lashes are dark and long, accenting the blue in the irises until it's nearly startling. My cheeks are rosy with blush and my lips are painted a dark purple.

"Honestly, Oksana, this is—" I stop as I turn to face her and the purple pieces of hair she's holding in her hands. "What are those?"

"These are clip-in extensions. We're curling them to match your hair and they're going in. Don't

you love the ombre?"

I do, actually. I've always loved colorful hair, but Feodora would never allow it. The girls have had their hair all kinds of colors, while Feodora usually dyes hers blonde. But these are a beautiful bright purple with a lavender ombre at the roots. I can't wait to see how it looks in my hair.

"Where did you get them?" I ask as Oksana proceeds to unroll my curlers and clip the extensions in.

"Lubov got them for the dress," Oksana replies vaguely.

"And the dress?"

"I made it, duh," Lubov says as she steps back out of the room.

"She made it?"

"She's been practicing," Oksana says, her voice full of pride. "Since that's what she plans on apprenticing for, I told her she can make dresses for you as a test run."

"Why couldn't she make dresses for you?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"Because I'm not the one who's going to the ball to charm a prince."

"What?" I exclaim, jerking in my seat. "Ouch."

"I told you to stop moving around, Mira," Oksana says, giving me a serious look, but I see right through it.

"I don't understand why you're so set on this," I grumble.

"Hey, you're the one who received magical slippers and basically a direct command to be at the ball wearing them." My friend shrugs, but I don't buy it.

"First of all, I have no idea if the magic will even work. Second, you were all about me going to the ball even before that, so don't blame it on the old lady."

Oksana pauses her work, and squats down in front of me, her eyes on me. All joking around has been put aside as she watches me with an intense gleam in her gaze.

"Mira, I have a good life. A business that's prosperous, a family who loves me—"

"And a handsome suitor." I wiggle my eyebrows at her, and she blushes.

"And yes, maybe even that. But you don't." That sobers me up immediately. "You deserve a good life, my friend. And if I can help in any way, I am determined to do so."

"I live a good life, Oksana."

"What you have—what you've been doing—is surviving. I want you to have the chance to live, really live, and follow your own dreams and passions."

"And you think a prince will get me there?"

"You don't need a prince to get you anywhere. But you can spend a night dancing beneath the stars in the arms of a handsome man who already seems to like you. No, don't argue. We don't have time for this. I have to finish your hair."

She doesn't wait for a response. She just stands and gets back to work.

Originally, I agreed to this because I thought of it as a gift to her. She seemed so happy to do it. But now I realize just what a gift she's giving me. I blink back a sudden rush of tears. I cannot ruin all her hard work with waterworks. I have a ball to attend.

When Lubov comes in with the dress, I think I *am* going to ruin all the makeup. It's too beautiful even to look at. How am I supposed to wear it?

"Are you sure?" I ask Lubov, and the younger girl grins.

"You're going to look hot."

Oksana and I laugh at that, but I take off my robe and let them place the dress on the floor, so I can step into it.

The color of the dress is white, I think, but it has layers of purple and silver tulle over it, creating an almost living color as I move. The skirt is huge, grazing the floor. The waist is cinched as I pull the lacy quarter sleeves up over my arms. Oksana moves forward, pulling half my hair up and away from my face with a clip. Then, she places the mask over my face and takes a step back.

"Wow."

"Holy moly, Mira," Lubov breathes out.

"Yeah?"

"Oh yeah."

I grin at the young girl's enthusiasm, and when I turn toward the mirror, I freeze. The dress is perfect on me, the color suits my complexion perfectly. My hair is blonde and purple, pinned halfway up. The mask is really a magnificent finishing touch, as the makeup Oksana did hides most of my face and creates a character of sorts.

When my friend places the golden shoes in front of her, I give her a look.

"You're wearing them," she says, and I sigh. I guess I have no choice. When I step out of my shoes and into the golden slippers, I feel better. If my feet could talk, they'd be singing in happiness. They feel perfect on me, comfortable, and somehow fitted to my feet as if they were made for me.

"They don't match," Lubov comments.

"No one will see," Oksana replies, as I drop the skirt down and cover the shoes.

I have no idea if they hold any magic, but with the way I look, I might not need it. I guess we're about to see.

MIRA

"I DON'T THINK THIS IS SUCH A GOOD IDEA," I SAY FOR WHAT SEEMS LIKE THE HUNDREDTH TIME. Oksana and I walk toward the ballroom. It feels absolutely unreal to be wearing this dress, my hair purple and my face obscured by the mask.

"I think it's a brilliant idea, and since I'm older and wiser, my opinion carries more weight," Oksana replies. She's sneaking me in through one of the side entrances, and I'm getting more nervous by the second.

"Did you just call yourself old?" She rolls her eyes at my jab but doesn't slow down. She's on a mission. However, when we reach the outer side doors, I freeze.

Oksana turns, giving me a sympathetic look before she schools her features into something more fierce.

"Mira, I know you're scared, but I have never known you not to do something just because you were scared. After everything you've been through, you're the strongest person I know. What's so different about this?"

It's a good question, and one I wish I had a simple answer to. But nothing is truly simple when it comes to the matters of the heart. And mine has felt unbalanced for days.

"What if Feodora sees me?" I ask, settling on a half truth.

"The magic in the slippers will keep that from happening."

"But how do you know?" I still can't wrap my mind around it. Oksana steps forward, clasping my

hands in hers.

"Because I believe."

Her answer is so simple, her words so true, that I can't help but trust them. If she tried to convince me, I might've argued. But the pure faith she seems to have in this is enough for me.

"Okay, okay. Are you sure you're not coming with me? You don't have to be in the kitchen tonight." Oksana blushes furiously, and I grin, immediately understanding. "Go find your kitchen boy…man. And have fun!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Oksana says, her standard reply. Then she winks. "I'll be watching you."

With that, she steps into the shadows, and I walk up to the inner doors leading from the hallway to the courtyard. The two guards standing there do a slight double-take before they pull the doors open.

I've been part of the decorating process for days, but nothing prepares me for the beauty I see in front of me.

The whole garden seems to be glowing and alive somehow. There's an arch of tulle and fairy lights over the door I enter through, but then it opens up to the large space for dancing. The tree with always-blossoming flowers stands in the midst of it all, like a proud mama watching over her children. Strings of lights fill the branches of every tree and bush. I can't tell if they're actual lights or magical orbs. Everything seems to pulsate with magic. The tables are pushed to the sides, set up underneath the branches, and there's a buffet set up closer to the palace entrance near the kitchen. Everything is as it should be.

It's the only thought in my head as I gaze upon dancing and laughing guests.

People are adorned in the most elaborate of costumes, meshing the past and the present in inventive ways. A woman walks by me, her dress modeled after Catherine the Great's coronation gown. I've studied the human realm's history enough to recognize it on sight, with its open neck, pearl-white layers of fabric, and imperial emblems printed across the skirt. The woman is also wearing an elaborate crown, and I smile to myself.

Reds and golds fill the space around me, embroidery and patterns covering every inch of clothing. *Sarafan* dresses with their rainbow-colored patterns can be seen as well. That's when I realize my dress stands out among them all. It's much too white, purple, and silver to blend in with traditional colors. I can't believe I didn't think of that.

Of course, this means everyone is staring at me. It takes all my self-control not to fidget. Or worse, turn around and flee from this place as if I don't belong, which, of course, I don't. I'm a girl playing dress up. I'm—

"May I have this dance?"

I turn slowly to find Prince Luca beside me. He's wearing a dark blue dress coat with golden embroidery on the lapels. It's shorter than a regular *kaftan*, and a lot less flashy, but it suits him. His eyes are ablaze with his typical mischief past the simple dark mask, but now his gaze is also filled with awe. He's looking at me like I'm the most beautiful girl he has ever seen, and not in the polite way I've seen him look at others. This is genuinely an appreciation of my appearance. I blush under the mask.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," he says. A part of my heart sinks right then and there. Of course he has no idea who I am. Maybe the magic is masking me from everyone, or Oksana has done an outstanding job at disguising my face. I'm still not fully sold on the magic part, but if it's working, there is no reason it would be any different with him.

But for a moment there, I really wanted him to recognize me.

Pushing that thought aside, I give him a smile and take his extended hand into my gloved one.

"You haven't," is all I say, and he chuckles.

"Ah, mysterious. Well, will the lady allow me to lead her in a dance?"

I don't think I could say no even if I tried. Even though my parents taught me all the traditional dances, I've never been to an official ball as an adult. They were gone before I was old enough to attend. Now, it feels like I'm finally doing another thing they would've loved for me.

Luca leads me to the dance floor. He leads me in a half circular walk, his gaze sweeping over me, before I stop in front of him. Now that we're here, I feel awkward because I know who he is, and he has no idea about me.

But then, I realize maybe that's a good thing. I can be anyone I want to be tonight. Not an orphan, or a poor servant girl, but a lady of society dancing with a prince. With that realization, I'm the one who moves forward first. He grins as he places one hand around my waist while still holding my hand with his other. I put my free hand on his shoulder, not taking my eyes off his.

Even with his dark mask, I would recognize him anywhere. He's become an annoying clumsy shadow around this palace, but as we start to move, I find he's anything but clumsy. His movements are precise, years of practice coming into play. Yet it's the intensity in his gaze that keeps me captive.

We move through the room as if held together by an invisible ribbon, wrapped tightly around our waists. It's as if we've been doing this dance all our lives. We anticipate each other's movements, spinning and shifting as the music flows through us. Luca pulls me even closer as we turn together as one. My breath catches somewhere three steps behind. The sound of the melody drifts farther and farther away as we continue to spin, but my whole attention is on his eyes.

He seems just as captivated as I am, and when the music finally stops and the people around us begin to clap, he doesn't step back. He doesn't let go. Our chests fall in rhythm as we breathe in and out together.

"I'm Luca," he says finally, and I smile. A movement over his shoulder catches my eye, and my heart drops for all kinds of different reasons.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I reply. I take a step back, slipping out of his grasp and into the crowd.

CHAPTER

FIFTEEN

LUCA

My whole body is antsy, and I can't understand why. I love these types of celebrations, especially the masquerade part. Even though my clothing is finely tailored, no one recognizes me. Not yet, at least. I've been keeping to the shadows.

I'm watching Maxwell and Jemma dance when I see her. She steps out from under one of the trees, the glow of the lights surrounding her as she stares up at the decorations as if they're the most fascinating thing she's ever seen. There's so much wonder in her face that even with the mask obscuring half of it, I can see it. It makes me smile.

So many of the people I'm around have perfected the nonchalant response to most things. After all, being impressed is not for rich people. If I see one of them crack a genuine smile, I might have Maxwell write it in one of the history books. No one would believe me otherwise.

But this girl, she doesn't care. She studies everything as if she's never seen anything like it. Her dress is white with a mixture of purple and silver undertones, and it sparkles as she walks. Her hair is purple, and as I move to intercept her, I see there are white and silver vines painted on her cheek and collarbone.

She's a princess, but not one I've met.

My feet move toward her as if pulled by some invisible string. When I step up to her, the words are out before I can introduce myself.

"May I have this dance?"

She turns, and the full power of her beauty slams into me. My breath gets stuck in my throat. My brain has completely shut down. Her eyes meet mine. They're the most exquisite blue I've ever seen. They remind me of the sky the morning after a storm has passed and taken all the clouds away.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure," I manage. I must look like an idiot, gaping at her.

"You haven't," she replies, and I'm mesmerized all over again, this time by her voice. It's like everything about her is just perfect. A part of me feels like I know her, but no matter how much I try, I can't place her in the lineup of royals I know of.

"Ah, mysterious. Well, will the lady allow me to lead her in a dance?" I finally ask, and she nods.

We step onto the dance floor. She walks about slowly before coming to stand in front of me. A trail of goosebumps races up my back at the sight of her. She lifts her eyes to mine, and for a second, it's like she's unsure of herself. But then, she's the one who takes the step forward, and I can't help but grin.

A contradiction in the truest sense.

A royal who's fascinated by pretty lights and elaborate dresses, yet shy and unsure of herself, as if it's her first time at a party.

Mama taught me how to read people. It's a skill any ruler should have if he or she is going to be a good one. I have to know my friends from my foes. Usually, I have no problem figuring someone out right away. Recently, I've only had a problem with one.

My mind flicks back to Mira. I wonder if she'll come tonight. My eyes rest on the girl in front of me, but it's not her. Even in costume, I would know her, of that I am sure.

It doesn't matter anyway. Mira and I are…friends. And the girl in front of me is a stranger. Yet I am fascinated. My parents taught me to be present in the moment, so I pull all my attention on her, and suddenly, I don't think I could look away even if I wanted to.

My hand settles on her waist, pulling her closer, and I can't tell if I imagine the tiny gasp that escapes her. Or maybe it's simply my own body's reaction to her proximity. Even through the layers of clothing, we're both radiating too much heat.

As the music swells over us, we move together, as if we've been doing this for ages and not for the first time. I can't look away from her eyes, and she seems to have the same problem with mine. The rest of the courtyard drifts away as I fall deeper and deeper into the blue of her irises.

When we finally stop spinning, I don't let go. Our breaths are in sync, our skin warm, and I curl my hand even more into her waist, pulling her closer.

The clapping starts when the music ends, jarring me from the enchantment.

"I'm Luca," I say, and am rewarded with a beautiful smile.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," she replies before she steps out of my arms, disappearing into the crowd. Confusion furrows my brow as I watch her weave between people. But before I can take a step forward, a woman steps in front of me.

"*Dobrey vecher*, Your Royal Highness," the woman says with a bow. I incline my head. I guess my costume wasn't enough of a disguise. I've lost sight of the princess, my view obscured by the giant hive of blonde hair on top of the woman's head. "May I introduce my daughters? Agrippina and Galina."

I focus my attention on the woman before turning to the girls beside her. Their dresses have more color than a blossoming garden, every shade blinding in its bright undertones. The girls bow, and I do the same as another song begins to play.

"Would you—" the woman begins right as Maxwell steps up next to me.

"If you'll excuse us, the prince is needed elsewhere."

The woman opens her mouth, as if she's going to protest. I incline my head at the three of them before I follow Maxwell.

"You looked like you needed saving," he says. I couldn't be happier that he knows me that well. "Who was the princess you were dancing with?"

"I have no idea," I reply, my eyes continuously scanning my surroundings. "But she was something. We didn't even talk, and I felt—a connection."

I feel stupid the moment the words leave my mouth, but Maxwell only chuckles.

"That's usually how the whole being-smitten thing goes. What are you going to do?"

I think I see her hair. Distracted, I miss half of what Maxwell says before it registers.

"Smitten?"

"Okay, intrigued." The historian tries a different approach. "It's okay to be intrigued by a pretty girl."

What he's not saying is that I've made sure never to be smitten by anyone. I've shut off a lot of

parts of myself over the years, keeping the place for my family the only area I allow any genuine emotion. But in recent days, that all seems to be going out the window. It's a confusing time, to say the least.

"I'm going to make a round," I say, deciding to ignore his words. He doesn't miss my tactic, but he doesn't call me out on it. "Go take care of your wife."

He grins at the mention of Jemma, and then I'm the one moving away. This intense need in me to find the mysterious girl is a little troubling, but also exciting in a way. Plus, it saves me from dancing with more eligible daughters of high society ladies.

Now, if I were this mysterious princess, where would I go to hide?

MIRA

My heart is threatening to burst out of my chest and not for any good reason, like dancing with the prince. I saw Feodora coming, and I bolted. She looked right at me and had no idea who I was. I've never believed in magic before, but I can't deny that something happened. Neither Feodora nor the prince recognized me. Even if I am starting to trust in this magic, I'm not about to take any chances and test the golden slippers any more than I already have by staying near Feodora.

Lifting my skirt so I can see the shoes, I raise one foot at a time to admire them. They may not go well with this dress, but I think they're my favorite accessories in the realm. Sorry to my trusty bag and journal, but these golden darlings just saved my life.

There is no way Feodora would ever forgive me for such blatant disobedience, not to mention pulling one over on her and embarrassing her family in front of the royals. I don't have to hear her say the words. I know that's exactly what she would call it. Then she'd throw me in some windowless room for a few nights with no food or water—if I'm lucky.

There are much worse things she could do.

I'm not exactly sure where I'm going, but when I look at the large clock on the wall near the buffet tables, I see that I have an hour before I need to be home. I'm definitely not testing this magic past midnight.

Moving quickly, I slip into the hallway and toward the front of the castle where the vendors have been camping out. On the other side of the moat, tents have been set up with various tables. People are even sleeping out there to stay close to the party and all the visitors. There are people everywhere, but no one seems to spare me a second glance, unless they're looking at my dress. I smile in gratitude at the compliments thrown my way.

When I step out the front doors, I look over to the vendors and the party that is spilling out onto the streets. The whole kingdom is celebrating, and my heart swells at the meaning behind this place and time in our history. We've had twenty-five years of fair rule by a fair queen and magical balance restored to our land. My eyes fill with tears as I picture my parents dancing under the glow of the moonlight.

"There you are." Luca's voice comes from behind me, and I turn to watch him step out onto the bridge with me. It's lowered, of course, for the celebration, and people pass on their way in and out of the castle.

"I apologize for leaving so quickly, Your Royal Highness. I needed some fresh air." I realize how absurd that sounds the moment I say it considering we were outside already, but he doesn't comment. Instead, he gives me a simple smile.

"I know what you mean. All those bodies close together like that can become suffocating."

So maybe it's not as absurd as it sounded in my head.

"Shouldn't you be in there, charming the guests?" I ask.

"Oh, so you think I'm charming?"

A typical Mira retort is on my lips, but I stop myself just in time. I remind myself that I'm not Mira tonight. I'm a confident, mysterious princess, and I can flirt with the prince if I choose to do so.

"There's a potential for charming," I say, giving him a side smile. "I would simply need more evidence for a final conclusion."

He laughs, and it's the sound I've come to know from him. It's the polite kind of laugh I heard when I first met him, before he felt comfortable enough with me to smile for real. It's curious to see this contrast in him.

"Does that mean you're willing to give me another chance on the dance floor? We may also hold a conversation this time."

"Is that right? What would we talk about? The riches in your accounts? The latest fashions?"

"If it strikes your fancy. We could always talk about the magical creatures of the forest or the restoration efforts in the parts of it that were destroyed by the war years ago. There are also books and music, and I heard movies are becoming more widespread in the land."

I turn to him then, studying him from behind the cover of my disguise, fully looking at him like I never allow myself to do otherwise. This prince, this man, is so much more than what I always thought of him. I can't seem to reconcile all the versions of him I have in my head.

The carefree playboy who's going on all these dates.

The sweet guy who climbs citrus trees to pick oranges.

The confident prince who walks right up to a giant cat who may swipe at him at any moment. He's so many things, and yet, I don't know which one to believe. Can people truly be so many things and still be true to themselves?

"Do you have time for such novelties while you date every eligible maiden in the land?" I ask, surprising myself as much as him. That wasn't what I wanted to focus on, but I can't help my interest.

"A prince is required to marry for the good of the kingdom," he replies with a smile, but it doesn't reach his eyes. He's lost the mask he was wearing earlier, but it still feels like he's wearing an invisible one.

"And you're a prince who does his duty." It's not a question. He studies me for a moment longer.

"There is something required of all of us."

His words pierce my heart with their truth, and I realize just how much I've fought my whole life to do what is required of me. Maybe we're more alike than I first thought.

I have this fierce need to get him to open up to me all of a sudden, and I don't know what to do with that. Before I can decide, a clock chimes somewhere, and I realize it's time to go.

"I'm sorry, Your Royal Highness, but it is time for me to go." I step around him, heading down the bridge and toward the vendors.

"Go?" He follows, and I realize it'll be difficult to shake him. I've seen how determined he can be.

"*Da*. I have a curfew. So, if you'll excuse me." I step around him again, but he blocks my path. Glancing up, I find him studying me.

“Will I see you again?”

I want to say yes. The word is nearly on my lips when I stop myself. I can’t think like this. Coming back here would be dangerous, and when he sees me again as Mira, he’s not going to know who I am.

“That remains to be seen,” I reply. Just then, a few people pass by, heading into the castle. I take a step into their group, putting them between myself and the prince. The clock chimes again, and then I’m racing into the night. I can’t risk anyone seeing me when the magic fades.

So, I don’t look back, even when he calls out.

CHAPTER

SIXTEEN

LUCA

A few hours later, once the musicians played their last note and the people retired back to their rooms, I find my mama in her room. After the mysterious princess disappeared, I looked for her, but she was gone. I found Ekaterina sitting in the corner, enjoying her fifth or sixth drink of the night. She kept talking about the royal family from her kingdom and how they arranged a marriage for the princess, and the prince she was betrothed to was coming to meet her. That's why the royal family of *Korolevstro Tsvetov* couldn't come to the celebration. But the part Ekaterina kept harping on was how she would never agree to an arranged marriage and how the idea is preposterous and dated.

"They would have to tie me down and sell me off like a piece of lettuce!" she exclaimed three times. I can't help but chuckle at the absurdity of that statement. But clearly, her kingdom is going through some stuff, and so is she. We're not acquainted enough for me to pry, so I don't. I help her to her room before coming back to find my parents.

Now, Papa is making sure everyone is safe for the night, or what remains of it, and Mama is standing in the middle of her room, almost in a trance. I give her a few moments before I step inside.

"What is it, Mama?" I ask, walking closer to her. The look on her face…I can't explain it. It pierces me straight to the heart. It's the most worried I've seen her, and I don't know what to do with that. She's the only unmovable force I know, so it rattles me to see her unbalanced.

"I'm not sure," she says, walking over to the doors leading out to her private garden, taking a seat on the *divan* beside the doors. Each of the main rooms has its own garden because our blood needs to be near Skazka's magic.

Kot-Bayun sticks his head nearly all the way in from outside, as if he too can feel the unsettling emotions running through my mama right now. He's been going out into the woods a lot lately. Maybe he's sensing things as well. Even though she hasn't said it, I can see the worry.

"How can I help?" I ask. A part of me wants to scream at my non-existent magic. If there's real danger, if I have to protect her and this kingdom, I'm only as good as a soldier.

Mama stares out into the night, her hand petting Kot-Bayun absentmindedly. It never amazes me to see this cat, the one from storybooks that speak of him luring soldiers into the forest and feeding off their flesh, purring like a kitten at my mama's touch.

Even though he is purring—and it vibrates the ground beneath our feet—he's not completely relaxed. His piercing eyes are on my mama, watching her with an unnerving intensity. She closes her eyes briefly before speaking.

"There's something, right beyond my reach," she whispers. Then she shakes herself, turning her

attention to me. "Come. Sit. Tell me about your night."

"Mama." I give her a look, but I take a seat beside her on the *divan*. "Tell me what you felt."

She used to talk to me about magic, about what it would be like when my powers awakened. But then, year after year went by and the time for my magic to come out finally passed. I may be a descendant of one of the most powerful magical families in the history of Skazka, but that doesn't mean much when my magic doesn't work. What I do have is general knowledge about it, and the desire to understand it so I can be prepared to help in the best way I can.

"Is it her?"

Mama doesn't have to ask who I'm talking about. It all comes back to Baba Yaga, no matter how much we wish it didn't.

"I know she's close, but she's not using her magic so I can't find her."

"She's not?"

"Not in the way I'm used to, at least. I'm missing something, and I don't know what, and it frustrates me. Don't tell your father. He'll just worry," she hurries on to add.

"He'll know anyway," I say, running a hand through my hair. "You two are attuned to a frequency entirely of your own."

She smiles at that, and I can't help but stare. My mama is the most beautiful woman I know, but when she thinks of my Papa—or when she's in his vicinity—she transforms into an even more striking beauty. I don't understand it, but it has never diminished over the years.

"You're right, he will. I'm just a little worried. With everyone in town and in one place, if she's back to her full power, she could do some real damage."

I grew up on stories of Baba Yaga, the child-eater and the sorceress *volshebnitsya,* who wanted to take the magic of Skazka for herself. She was draining the land and using Mama to do so, twisting the truths of the prophecy to suit her own plans. But Mama, along with Papa and Uncle Maxwell, defeated her. However, that doesn't mean she can't come back and try again. People—if I can call her that—like her always do.

My parents' legacy is a lot to live up to and something I don't think I can ever fully do. It weighs on me every day, this fear that I will let them down, just like I've let those I cared about down before.

Tonight when I told the princess that a prince must marry for the good of the kingdom, I think it was the first time I put into words what I always think in my head. Even though my parents specifically said they would never marry me off, and want me to find the kind of love they have, I long ago decided that probably won't be my path. It'll be wise to make a good alliance when the time comes, with no heart involvement. Except when it comes to the kingdom. I will always use my heart when it comes to caring for the kingdom.

But that's a conversation for another day and another time.

An image of the princess briefly flashes in my mind before it's replaced with Mira. Two completely different women, and yet, they both seem to see right through my walls and into my heart. I should take lessons from them about reading people. I could learn a thing or two.

"Who is she?" Mama's voice brings me back to the present, and I turn to see her watching me.

"What?"

"The girl you danced with tonight, who is she? I've never seen her before, but there was something..." She drifts off, and when I wait for her to continue, she doesn't.

"I don't know," I reply. "She didn't give me her name, and then she said she had a curfew and disappeared into the night."

Mama narrows her eyes, and I can see her calculating for risk. It is worrisome the princess would

keep her identity a secret, but maybe since she said she had a curfew, she wasn't supposed to be out so late? That doesn't make sense if she came for the ball. Or…I really don't have an explanation. I just know there are kingdoms in Skazka with monarchs I've never met and know nothing about, so it's a fair guess she might be from one of those.

"If she returns for the second ball, I'll be sure to find out more," I tell Mama, and she nods.

"If she's a visiting royal, her family would've been announced at the palace," Mama muses. "And they would come for the next dance as well."

"Maybe she's just shy and didn't want the attention of being the only girl the prince danced with," Papa says, coming into the room.

"You noticed that too, huh?" Mama asks, and I glance between the two.

"Okay, I see what's happening here, and I really don't appreciate you ganging up on me like this," I say, standing up.

"What do you mean?" Papa's voice is all innocence. "I'm just making a completely innocent observation about my son dancing with a pretty girl."

"I'm going to see myself out," I say, dropping a kiss to the top of Mama's head before I move toward the door.

"Luca." Her voice stops me, and I turn to watch Papa take a seat beside her and reach for her hand. With their fingers clasped and Kot-Bayun's large body curling behind them, they suddenly look how I imagine they looked fighting Baba Yaga. Strong and determined and so in love they were ready to do whatever it took to have a future.

"I hope you know we only want what's best for you," Mama says.

"I know." And I truly do.

"Sometimes that means what you think is best for you isn't quite what is," she continues. I narrow my eyes in confusion. "Just be open to possibilities, Luca. They are vast, and so is your future."

I know a part of that has to do with the past I carry, the guilt I feel over not being quite enough to be the next king.

"I love you, Mama," is all I say.

"I love you, my sweet *malchik*." she replies.

I step out, shutting the door behind me.

So many emotions turn inside me, and I'm more determined than ever to push them away and do what needs to be done. That means, tomorrow, I need to go on half a dozen dates and find out as much as I can about what's going on in my kingdom.

A pretty girl in a pretty dress that feels like magic under my fingertips cannot be allowed to distract me.

MIRA

BY THE TIME I'M NEARING MY HOUSE, FEAR HAS GRIPPED MY HEART TO THE POINT OF EXHAUSTION. I have never been in these woods alone so late. Every little sound that reaches my ears sets my nerves on edge, especially after seeing the strange horsemen galloping around.

I stopped by Oksana's house only long enough to change out of the dress and into my regular Mira

outfit. Her family was still at the ball, or the party in front of it, so I let myself in. The dress really did feel like armor, the paint on my face and the silky material against my skin giving me courage. I talked to the prince like I was his equal, like I could call him out on the things he was thinking or doing and be seen and understood when I spoke. It seems unreal in a way. I think I might wake up tomorrow and not believe a thing.

So when I finally do step through the front doors of the house, I go straight for the kitchen, starting a fire before I settle in front of it with my journal in hand. I make a lot of lists in here, but among the pages there are also glimpses of my life. Short paragraphs of memories are squeezed in every so often, and this one feels important enough to write down. My shoulders are stiff by the time I'm finished. When I lie down in front of the fire, I drift off into a dreamless sleep.

The next morning, the sound of rain wakes me. Pushing myself into a sitting position, I glance at the clock on the wall and gasp. I'm so late. Grabbing the dress that I shed last night, I pull it over my head while walking. I stop long enough to pick up a piece of bread and my bag, and then I'm out the door.

It rains for a few moments and then, thankfully, stops. The forest seems unnaturally alive this morning, but I keep my eyes focused on the road, refusing to see what may be watching me from the branches.

When I finally rush inside the palace almost an hour later than I should, I'm out of breath and sweaty. The whole place is alight with activity, people cleaning up the remainder of last night's ball and preparing for the next one tomorrow night. In between the balls, there are lunches and brunches and dinners with games and gossip and laughter. All the things that make up a good party atmosphere.

As I round the corner, I freeze. The royal family stands in the middle of the hall. My eyes immediately go to Luca, who is smiling at something his mother just said. He looks even more like a prince this morning, if that is at all possible. His slacks are freshly pressed, his button-up shirt perfectly tailored to fit his broad shoulders and well-defined arms.

Why am I admiring his biceps?

Almost like he can feel my gaze on him, he turns, his eyes finding mine. Maybe it's the combination of hiding in the closet with him and then dancing under the twinkling lights, but I feel like my whole body is on fire. His lips curl up in a smile, and I duck my head. There's no way he can know what I'm thinking.

"*Dobroye utro*, Your Majesty," I mumble, keeping my head down as I try to pass them.

"Miraslava." Queen Calista's voice stops me. "How are you this morning?"

When I look up at her, I notice Luca staring at his mother in surprise. That's strange because I think this woman knows all the people living under her care, so it shouldn't be weird that she knows my name.

"I am well, Your Majesty. Thank you so much for asking. And you? Did you enjoy the festivities last night?" Now that there's nothing broken or ruined nearby, my mind is free of anxiety, and the words spill out of me automatically, years of manners instilled in every fiber of my being. When I meet her eye, she's smiling.

"It was quite a beautiful event. The baked goods were incredible."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. I will pass your compliments to the baker. If you'll excuse me now?"

She nods, and I bow before I turn and flee. I refuse to linger or glance behind me to see if Luca is watching. Why would he be? The girl last night was not me. He has absolutely no clue who he danced with, so why should it matter?

"There you are!" Oksana exclaims as I step into the kitchen. "I was about to send out a search

party."

"I'm so sorry I'm late. By the time I fell asleep, it was morning—" I stop talking as Oksana walks over, peering at my face.

"What is that all over your cheeks?"

I turn toward one of the ovens where the shiny surface is less warped. The sight causes me to gasp. My right cheek is smudged with pieces of cinder from the fire. I grab for the closest towel and rub to get it off.

"Hey, it's okay," Oksana says as my movements become frantic. "Let me."

She takes the towel and walks over to the water bowl, dabbing it inside before handing it back to me.

"What has you so on edge?"

"The queen and the whole royal family just saw me like this," I say, keeping my voice low. Looking over, I see Oksana's eyes grow wide before she tries to hide it.

"I'm sure it's fine. They didn't think anything of it. They're not—" She stops, but I know what she's trying to say. They're not Feodora. I would get a good lashing for presenting myself like this to anyone, especially the queen. The panic in my chest recedes a little as I remind myself that Queen Calista is a kind woman and would never react like my stepmother. Placing a hand over my chest, I push on the necklace resting there and breathe.

"I'm okay. I'm just a little rattled." I smile at my friend, and she gives me a sympathetic squeeze on the shoulder. That's when I notice this rosy glow to her that has nothing to do with the baking.

"Enough about me, tell me about your date with Yura."

She grows redder and moves away immediately, back to her work table. We have a lot of baking to do today, as we're constantly turning out more and more goods. These people really like to eat, that's for sure.

"What I want to know is about your night," she whispers. "I heard rumors of a mysterious princess that turned the prince's head. He didn't dance with anyone else besides her."

"But we only danced the one dance," I say, receiving an *aha* and a finger pointed in my direction.

"I knew it was you. It couldn't have been anyone else."

"Keep your voice down, Oksana," I whisper, grabbing her finger and pulling it down. "He can never know."

"So the magic of the slippers worked?"

"It did. Apparently. I was completely hidden. And good thing because I almost ran into the step monsters."

"Oh, that would've been bad." Oksana's eyes grow big. "But if it worked, that's great!"

"It was. I had a chance to be someone else, you know? Really, truly be someone else for the night. We talked like we connected, and it was barely a conversation at all."

It doesn't make sense, even to me. But it's like I've found a kindred soul in him. I don't understand it any more now than when I thought it back at the orchard.

"He's going to love that it's you. When are you going to tell him?"

"What?" I jerk back to reality, turning to face my friend. "I can never tell him."

"But you connected, while you were you and while you were her." Oksana lowers her voice. "Why can't you tell him?"

"Because last night was a fluke. I'm not some royal he would even be able to consider… marrying. So, it'd be pointless to mess things up when I'm so close to finishing this job unscathed."

When Oksana doesn't reply right away, I finish washing my hands and turn to her.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Are you sure about that last part? About being unscathed?”

I want so desperately to say yes, but the word doesn’t come, and that scares me. I can’t lose focus right now, I cannot. Pushing all my emotions and thoughts down, I simply shake my head and step up to the work table.

“It doesn’t matter. Tell me about your man.”

CHAPTER

SEVENTEEN

LUCA

If I'm being honest with myself, today has been a very long day. It's not even lunchtime yet, and I've already spent time with half a dozen of the visiting eligible ladies. I say eligible because I'm hearing the rumors behind my back. According to the staff, it looks like I'm looking for a wife. Because why wouldn't I take the opportunity while they're all here to spend some time with each? It's like speed dating.

That's almost a direct quote Maxwell and I overheard this morning after I said goodbye to lady number four.

"My princess," I say now, motioning for the young woman to go before me as we head for the front doors of the castle. I make sure to give her a big smile that she returns. It's not like I'm not enjoying myself. They're all nice. But even if I *was* looking for a future queen, I wouldn't be looking here. My mind flicks briefly to the mysterious princess last night, and then it makes its way to Mira. I shut that down fast. I can't be thinking such things, not about an employee. The princess is clearly much more acceptable in the eyes of the kingdom, but I don't know her well enough to know if she would suit them. Unlike Mira. She definitely has the kind of heart the kingdom would love.

"Prince Luca?"

I shake my head, refocusing on the princess beside me.

"Are you all right?" she asks, concerned. I give her a broad smile.

"Of course, just remembered something I need to take care of when we return."

"We don't have to go if you're too busy." She's nice, one of the king's daughters from *Ocenevo Tsarstva*. This time, I give her a genuine smile.

"*Nyet*, it's not a problem. I just made a mental note."

Even though I have a feeling I won't be getting any information from her, or really, from any other visiting guests, I'm still determined to do my duty.

It's scary to think Baba Yaga might be waiting on the outskirts of this very castle right now. I grew up on stories my mama told of Baba Yaga's conquests and destruction. I can't imagine our kingdom going through that again. It survived once, but would it survive another time? I have to do everything I can to make sure that doesn't happen. But the only way I can help is to charm and impress these girls and try to find some information in all the chatter we exchange. It feels close to nothing, and yet, it is something only I can do.

We head out to the vendors spread out in front of the castle. There are tents and small tables lining the rows with every possible trinket on display. People of *Zelenovo Korolevstva* are talented in many

ways, and some of the biggest trades we have are woodwork and embroidery. Even most trade with the human realm involves one of those industries. Some of the tablecloths with patterns stitched by hand go for a lot of money in the human realm.

I never fail to be amazed by the ingenuity and perseverance of my people. This kingdom had gone through years of darkness, but even during that time, the people didn't lose hope. They held onto the fairytales and prophecies, working hard to keep themselves ready for when the time came for the land to prosper. And it did.

My mama was that saving grace for Skazka, and I am following in her footsteps. Everyone expects me to step up, just like she did, if anything happens. But I'm terrified that having no magic will make me a hindrance instead of a help.

The princess asks me questions about some of the trinkets we see. I answer, but my mind is still on the part where I would be completely useless in a fight. A magical fight. A sword fight I can handle.

The only time I ever tried to use magic, I failed. There's still a hole in my heart that seems like it'll never heal from that loss. But it's neither the place nor time to be thinking about that. I feel bad for letting my mind wander, and I focus back on the girl in front of me.

This battle I fight within me daily—of who I am and who I am supposed to be—is not something I will solve today. I trust my parents, and I trust this land. If Baba Yaga is back, we will handle it.

MIRA

"LOOK AT HIM," I MUMBLE AS WE WEAVE IN AND OUT OF THE VENDOR STALLS, HANDING OUT FRESHLY-baked cookies. It's technically not in our job description, but while the other dough rises, Oksana decided she wanted to bring out some treats. And, of course, we ran into him.

"Who, the prince?" Oksana asks, glancing in the direction I'm looking. The girl in front of him laughs at something he says, and I try to ignore the weird feeling rising in my chest.

"You really don't like him?" Oksana asks.

A week ago, I would have given her a different answer. Now, I'm not so sure. I've spent plenty of time with him, but I still don't know much about the kind of man he is. He keeps contradicting himself in my eyes. So, I focus on that.

"What's to like?"

"What do you mean by that?"

We stop for a moment as Oksana offers a cookie to the man in front of us. He takes it with a grateful smile. My friend really does love seeing people enjoy her food. I dodged her questions about the ball earlier, so I feel like maybe I owe her a better explanation of my conflicting emotions.

"It's not that I don't like him. It's just that he walks around like he's got the whole world laid out in front of him. It's probably air-conditioned and paved, and he's never had to do anything hard in his life."

I'm a little surprised at my own words. I stop for a moment, watching him offer the princess a porcelain cup with a painting of the Skazka forest on it.

"That's a little unlike you, Mira, to judge someone so harshly." I turn to look at my friend, who's

watching me with interest. Then her eyes go over my shoulder, in the direction I was looking.

She's right, of course. It is a harsh thought, especially since I know better. The few times I've been around him, I've seen him be more than just a spoiled brat. So why am I putting him in the same category as Feodora?

He is nothing like her. If I'm being honest, he's the opposite of everything I just said, so what's wrong with me?

"You're right, Oksana. I'm not even sure why I said it." My skin feels hot, even though it's not that warm out. I rub my hand over my chest where the necklace is hidden.

"I know why," my friend says before turning to hand out more cookies. I follow close behind, carrying the other basket. We pass a few booths before I can finally ask.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh, come on, Mira. Look at you. You're all flushed and snippy at the sight of him laughing with another girl." When I continue to look at her blankly, she laughs. "You're jealous!"

"I am not!"

"Really? You're not one to criticize in such a reckless manner. You are kindness almost to a fault, yet you paint him to be the bad guy. That tells me you're jealous."

"Stop saying that." I hush her, pulling her away from listening ears. "I am not…*that*."

"Sweetheart," Oksana says, stopping in front of me so I'm forced to look her in the eye. "It's okay if you like him."

"No, it is not okay. Not even a little bit." I feel a bit of panic rising in my chest. "I have a plan. A way to get out. I can't throw it all away on some feelings."

Oksana cocks her head to the side, studying me intensely as I push air into my lungs.

"What is it that scares you?"

"I've seen the way people pine. I can't be living here, in this terrible life…" I lower my voice as much as I can. "Hoping the prince of Skazka would pick me as his…well, not bride. I would never be that. And if, by some miracle, he likes me even a little, and we do date, what then? We have no future. We come from two different worlds. Plus, Feodora would never allow it, and it'd just be another thing she controls about my life. I can't do that. I can't care about someone I will lose. Because I lose people, Oksana. I lose them, and then I'm left all alone and—"

My chest feels like it's going to explode. I gasp, trying to catch a full breath, but my lungs refuse to cooperate. Oksana steps toward me, but I can't be seen like this in the middle of the bazaar, so I thrust the basket into her hands and turn to flee.

I've barely taken two steps when strong hands catch me around the shoulders. I'm opening and closing my mouth like a fish while the feeling of water closes over my head. That's when I hear my name.

"Mira."

Looking up, I find the stark green eyes of the prince peering down at me. His gaze, full of concern, meets mine. I think I'm about to completely lose it when he speaks again.

"Breathe with me," he says, not taking his eyes off me. "In. Out." My eyes don't leave his, the heat of his palms seeping through the sleeves of my dress. I follow his direction slowly. "In, out, there's a good girl. In. Out."

Good. Girl.

Oh.

Oh.

My heart skips a beat before it takes off at a kilometer a second. I stare at Luca with all kinds of

emotions running through me. Two words and he completely disarmed me.

"Better?"

It takes me much too long to find my voice.

"*Da*. I'm sorry about that." We still haven't moved, his hands on my shoulders, our eyes locked.

"No need to apologize. Are you sure you're okay?"

"I am," I reply. It hits me then where we are. I take a step back immediately. "Thank you, Your Royal Highness."

His eyes flash at the title, but he doesn't comment, inclining his head instead.

"You're welcome," he replies. I give him a tiny bow before my eyes shift to the girl right over his left shoulder. His date. There's a crowd gathered around us now, and I back away quickly, finding Oksana just two steps away.

"Come on," I say, grabbing the basket I thrust at her a few moments ago, pulling her along with me.

I can't believe I just embarrassed myself like that in front of everyone. In front of the prince.

What is going on with me?

CHAPTER

EIGHTEEN

LUCA

"Where's your head at today, *synok*?"

Papa's voice breaks through my thoughts. I look up to find him, sword drawn, watching me. We're supposed to be sparring, and while I'm moving through the motions, my mind is definitely elsewhere.

"Want to talk about it?" Papa asks. After no hesitation at all, I nod. He sheaths his sword, and I do likewise before he motions me with his head to follow him. We head to my parents' private garden on the other side of the training yard. As we pass the opening that would lead to the main courtyard, I can't help but let my eyes shift that way. Mira is out there somewhere, setting up for the third night of the celebration and the second masquerade ball. I have barely seen her since before the dance, except for what happened at the bazaar earlier. I think she's avoiding me.

We step inside the small garden, and I instantly feel better. The trees here have grown so tall, and they interconnect at the top, since the space is small. It creates an arch of sorts, or maybe a dome. I'm enveloped in nature, and my heart settles a little. It's the connection to Skazka. Even though I don't have any magic, I am still born of this land's magic.

Papa doesn't break the silence, giving me the time I need to come to terms with what I need to say. Mama is usually the one who pushes if she feels it's necessary, while he waits patiently.

My parents have always had this balance about them. Mama is like a hurricane, and Papa is the shelter in the midst of it. Two completely opposite entities, but somehow, they complete each other. I decide I should start at the beginning of all the things that are bothering me right now.

"I haven't been able to find out any information regarding Baba Yaga," I say as Papa hands me a glass of water. We both take a few gulps before he speaks.

"I appreciate you taking the time to try," Papa says, taking a seat beside me. "Especially with all the rumors it's starting."

"Ah, so you're aware."

"*Da*. I am aware. With Devra gone, I needed to turn up my gossip intake."

"How's that going?"

"It's all becoming too much. I'm ready to have the captain of the guard back at the palace." He says it deadpan, but then grins. We all miss Devra. And Ruslan. But my parents can't exactly be gone during a celebration they're hosting, so their seconds in command are out there, scouting.

"Speaking of rumors," Papa begins, and here we are.

"You heard what happened at the bazaar?"

"Yes. Want to tell me about it?" I shake my head, and he chuckles. "Who's the girl?"

Mira. How do I explain her to my father? I don't even understand it myself. All I know is when she rushed past me, I felt my heart drop right then and there. I abandoned my date without a second thought, racing after Mira. I don't think I breathed until she finally looked up at me with those beautiful eyes of hers.

"She's one of the hired help for the celebration," I reply before taking another sip of water. "Mira."

"Ah, yes. Your mother mentioned her."

"What?" That's news to me, and now I have a bunch of questions I'd like to ask. After all the time we've spent together the past week, I really don't know much about her. She never gives me a chance to ask.

"Apparently, the girl went to see the tree when your mother was there," Papa replies, and I can't help but smile. Mira and her fascination with that tree. "Your mother knew her parents. Back when they were alive."

"Mira's parents are dead?" My heart thuds, as if it's making sure I'm paying attention. Papa nods.

"Yes. I'm not sure about the details, though."

Maybe Mira will tell me herself. Or maybe not. I'm not sure why I'm so focused on her. There's just something about her that draws me in. It's a little how I think I've pictured myself falling for someone, if I was to fall for anyone.

"Papa, how do you and Mama work so well together? You're so different, and yet, you don't clash or compete. I've watched your bond grow stronger the older I get. And she…well, she has the magic. And you don't."

Papa studies me as I talk, and I know he sees right to the heart of the matter. It's the magic part that truly bothers me, and it's something we've talked about before. But it's like I need to hear it again.

"Your mom and I are a team, two pieces of a puzzle working in conjunction with each other toward a common goal. It's never been about competition but always about connection."

"That's what I want, Papa," I say honestly. I've seen my parents love each other through all the ups and downs of life, and even when they argue, they always come back together. That's the kind of love I've always dreamed of, the kind of queen I want by my side.

"You think it's possible to be a good ruler without magic?" The moment I ask the question, a cold sweat breaks out over my skin. Even though my parents know, we don't talk about it. Papa turns to face me, his full attention on me. I want to fidget under that stare, but I don't. I hold myself still, just like he taught me to do.

"Magic is a gift, Luca. A gift and a tool, but it's not what makes the heart of a true ruler. Your mama has developed a relationship with the power inside her, and you will discover your own power in time. Even if it doesn't look like your mother's."

We've had similar conversations over the years, but this one feels…more, somehow. Maybe it's like the words are finally sinking in.

"I know I've failed before. I don't want to disappoint you."

That's the real reason for all these mixed emotions, isn't it? It's not just that I'm attracted to Mira, or that I'm struggling to find my power, or that there's a threat of a powerful sorceress coming back to wreak havoc. It's me, possibly making the wrong choice when it matters most.

"Luca." Papa says my name in a way that makes me sit up. "I have always been proud of you. You have never disappointed me, and I have full faith in the future that you never will."

"But how?"

“Well, for starters, you have the best parents.” I chuckle at that, and he smiles. “But even more so, you have a heart that loves this land and her people, who are, in turn, your people. Being a good king doesn’t mean you never make mistakes. It means you are actively trying to do what’s best for those under your care. That will include mistakes, I’m afraid. That’s what makes us people and not gods. You have a good heart, let that be your magical power.”

It feels like he’s talking about everything, not just my eventual rule. Maybe it’ll be okay if I let myself see where this Mira thing leads me. Maybe it’s okay that I don’t have all the answers right now. The fact of the matter is that I will always keep trying my best.

MIRA

After the whole debacle at the bazaar, I really wanted to run home and spend the rest of the day scrubbing the walls. But with the dance tomorrow, there isn’t as much time to prepare as before, so we all need to be here.

Here is relative because Oksana saw how crazy embarrassed I was and let me be the one to run to the bakery to pick up some of the dough her ma prepared last night. At least it got me out of the castle for a bit.

I can’t believe I lost it like that. It’s been a long while since I’ve allowed my emotions to rule, and just like last time, it did not go well. Showing any kind of emotion is what got me in trouble with Feodora in the first place. I could never be a normal kid who just lost her father. I had to shut it down, and I had to become invisible. Or else she would hit me.

I think that’s why feeling any kind of attraction is so scary to me. My body is rebelling against it, as a protective mechanism.

But even more than the embarrassment, I can’t get Luca’s voice out of my mind.

Good girl.

I think I’m going to carry that phrase with me for an eternity.

After I pick up the dough, I’m heading back to the palace when a shrill voice reaches my ears. Looking up, I find Agrippina and Galina in front of one of the vendors, squealing. Feodora steps up to them, hushing them with a smile, but I can see by the look in her eyes, even from this distance, that she’s not happy.

That’s when it hits me that I’m completely exposed. And now they stand between me and my entrance back to the castle. If I’m seen, I won’t be able to explain away my presence, nor my attire. I’m wearing the dark blue of the palace staff, not my regular unimpressive brown. Feodora will put two and two together without much effort.

That means I have a huge problem.

Turning to the left, I step into one of the aisles with vendors on both sides of me. I’m a short walk away from my stepfamily now. Once I’m sure they can’t see me, I turn to the right, passing a few rows until I’m closest to the front. Going back toward the middle, I keep my eye out. Just when I think I’ve reached the middle aisle that’ll lead me to the castle entrance, they’re there.

I duck quickly, stepping behind a table and dropping down to my knees. This is a disaster. This whole day is just one thing after the other. Maybe it’s my punishment for going to the ball in the first

place. As if I had a right to be there.

Shaking my head, I push the intrusive thoughts away. Now would not be a good time to have another attack. My hands are shaking as I hold the basket of dough. I know I need to get this to Oksana sooner rather than later, but I can't exactly walk right past them. Now would be a good time to have those golden slippers handy. I left them at the bakery with the dress, though. I didn't want anything happening to them. But now something might happen to me.

I shut my eyes, take a deep breath in, hold it for ten seconds, and let it out. I do the exercise a few more times, letting my heart settle. Then, I get in a crouched position and peek out. Feodora and the girls are still in my way, basically standing in the middle of the middle aisle. What are the odds?

Seeing no other choice, because I can't sit here forever, I wait for someone to walk by. Then, I stand and head back out of the bazaar. Racing out of the mess of people, I find a place near one of the buildings and look back at the vendors. There isn't really a way to get past them, considering they're right up against the moat. The middle aisle is the only way to pass because that's where the bridge is. Unless I cross the water. Or go around.

Maybe one of the main gardens opens up to the Skazka forest, much like it does at my house. I could risk it. I sigh. I have to risk it.

Without waiting any longer, I take off down the street toward the part of the town that blends in with *Volshbnii Les*. This area is probably heavily guarded, but I'm hoping my outfit and the dough I'm carrying will be enough to convince anyone that I just got turned around coming back.

Surprisingly though, when I hit the forest, there are no guards. Nevertheless, I walk quickly, keeping the sound of people to my right so I don't wander off. My skin is clammy with worry, my mind racing. I let my guard down and this is what happens. I have to be more careful. I definitely can't go to the ball tomorrow night. I should probably be back at the house earlier than usual, just in case Feodora suspects anything. I'm so close to reaching my goals. I can't lose it all now.

The sound of a horse reaches my ears, and I glance around, expecting to see guards. But there's no one. As I turn to keep walking, a streak of white rushes between the trees. I realize it must be one of the mysterious horsemen. But what are they doing all the way over here?

I don't wait to find out if the other horsemen are behind. I simply speed up. The forest continues to make noise around me, an unfamiliar liveliness that I noticed on the way into town. Something is stirring in here.

A familiar voice sounds in the trees, and I freeze, scanning the shadows. It's absolutely impossible. There is no way whatsoever it could be who I think it is. But then, the voice sounds again, and I'm sure.

Papa.

My heart drops, my body going cold. There's only one creature from Mama's stories that can imitate the voices of loved ones. *Leshy*. The forest spirit who tricks travelers to their deaths. If I allow myself to be pulled toward him, I may be lost in the woods forever. The humanoid tree-like creature hasn't been seen in these parts for years. Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me now. After all, I am way too scared even to think straight.

I reach for my necklace, wrapping my fingers around it. Then I shake my head. I can do this. I am calm. I am safe. There's nothing to worry about. Forcing myself to keep walking, I repeat the mantra in my head.

When I finally feel like I've gotten past the main part of the castle grounds, I turn toward the castle itself and come up to a wall.

But of course. Why would this be easy? I stand there, contemplating how I could possibly climb

this, when I hear a sound behind me. My heart leaps into my chest. At this point, it could be anything. *Leshy*, the horsemen, another magical creature, or a guard who's going to take me to the dungeon. My body feels like it's going through a lot of emotions, but I force myself to turn and then I have a mini heart attack.

The queen's giant turquoise cat stares at me from between the trees. My heart drops into my stomach as I grip the basket with two hands. Even after previously meeting him, he's still a lot to take in.

I know the stories of Kot-Bayun. He is a ruthless creature, said to entice soldiers into the forest and eat them alive. He has always been believed to be an evil entity, a ghost that haunts the Skazka lands for his own benefit. But then along came Queen Calista.

The story goes that whoever holds the heart of the cat, holds his allegiance. The cat became attached to Queen Calista, and therefore, he has a good and pure heart now. But Queen Calista isn't here. I am. And technically, I'm trying to break back into the castle.

"I'm sorry," I say, not sure why, but I feel like I have to explain myself to this elephant-sized cat. "I had to think fast. If my stepmother finds out I'm here, she will punish me. Severely. She is not a kind woman, and she leaves scars where no one will see." I run one of my hands over my arm automatically. Even though nothing is visible, the cat follows the gesture, his eyes narrowing.

"I promise I'm not trying to cause harm," I continue. "I'm simply trying to get this dough to my friend so she can bake bread for dinner tonight. I'd like to avoid seeing my stepfamily, if at all possible."

I run out of steam, watching the cat watch me. It's the most intimidating stare down of my life. From what I can see of him, he's not even sitting up. He's been lying between the trees, keeping to the shade, and barely raised his head when I came up. But I have no doubt he'd take me out with one swipe of his paw if he thought I was a danger to his people.

He won't take his eyes off me. After what seems like an hour, he finally stands, arching his back in a stretch tall enough to bend some of the branches on the trees. Then, he steps forward.

My heart starts beating faster, but I don't move, afraid to make any intimidating noises. Kot-Bayun steps right up to me, his face hovering above mine as he studies me. I remind myself to breathe and wait it out. Even if I ran, he would catch me immediately. So, this is my only option.

Then, he does something peculiar. He gives my head a sniff, sending my hair flying. Next he steps nearly over me and uses one of his paws to push me along with him. I stumble, but I follow, and then, I watch as he steps up to the wall and head-butts it.

He does it twice, and a door swings open where the wall was all stone before. Shocked, I look up at him. He moves to the side, sitting down to watch me. I look at him and then at the open door twice before I realize what he just did.

"Thank you so, so much!" I exclaim. I move toward him, but then think better of it. Giving him a big smile, I reach the door and glance over my shoulder once more.

"Thank you."

He doesn't move to follow or leave his post, so I step inside and shut the door behind me. The moment it's closed, it disappears into the wall. I have no idea which part of the castle I'm near, considering they have quite a few gardens.

The castle opens up in front of me. I follow its big structure until I reach the entrance to the hall. This must be one of the side gardens that sits on the other side of the main courtyard garden used for the party. I just have to get back to the level with the kitchens and all will be well.

But when I move in the direction of the staircase, two men step in front of me.

“Hello there, pretty thing. You a little lost?” one of the men asks. He’s dressed in a colorful jacket, clearly one of the visiting nobles. His jacket isn’t embroidered with gold and silver threads, so I know he’s not royalty.

“I’m sorry, but I’m in a hurry.” I raise the basket a little, but as I try to move past them, they only step in front of me again, preventing me from moving forward. In fact, they start moving in as a hunter would, caging an animal. When my back hits the wall, I realize that’s exactly what they’re doing.

“What’s the hurry? We should have a little fun.”

My eyes narrow immediately, my chin coming up.

“There’s absolutely nothing we could do together that would be any kind of fun,” I say, keeping my voice firm. I may not stand up to Feodora on the regular, but I am capable of defending myself when the situation calls for it.

“We’ll see about that,” the taller of the two says right before he moves forward.

CHAPTER

NINETEEN

LUCA

When I round the corner, my eyes immediately find her. She's standing up straight, her chin raised, glaring at the two men in front of her. I can't hear what's being said from over here, but the way she holds herself tells me all I need to know. Without hesitation, I make my way toward them.

Before I've taken two steps, one of the men reaches for her. When he grabs her around the waist, all I see is red. I take off in a run, and just as I reach them, I hear a yelp and then the man is stumbling back. Mira has successfully kneed him in the groin. I grin.

"You little—" The man nearly leaps for her, but I step between them. He stumbles back immediately, a look of horror on his face.

"Is there a problem here?" I ask. My voice is coated in sweetness, but there's no way they miss the anger in my eyes. Mira steps up beside me. At first, I think she's going to attack him, but she doesn't. She simply moves a little closer to me. I can't help but feel a sense of…something fill me from inside. I know full well she can fight her own battles, but she's letting me take the reins. That something feels a little like pride.

"No problem here, Your Highness," the man—one of the visiting nobles I didn't bother learning the name of—stutters. "We were just passing by."

"I suggest you pass by a little faster. The young miss is too busy to entertain you."

The man shrinks into himself at the steel in my voice, but his companion isn't as smart.

"I'm sure she can rearrange her schedule and entertain for the right sum," he mumbles. This time, when my vision goes red, I don't fight it. The next thing I know, the man is pinned against the opposite wall, my forearm holding him nearly off the ground.

"I suggest you show a little respect," I growl, my voice full of anger. In the back of my mind, I know these are probably some of the men Mama is trying to make deals with, men I'll have to make deals with when I'm king, but I can't seem to let that matter right now. The hand that isn't pinning him to the wall is reaching for the knife I carry. I rip it out of its sheath in the next moment. But before I can do something that might get me into trouble, a strong hand wraps around my fingers. I glance over to find Mira's hand over my own, pulling the hand down.

"I am quite alright, Your Royal Highness," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. Her eyes are on me. The range of emotions coursing through my body is nearly too much to handle, but there's steadiness in her gaze and warmth in her touch.

My senses come back to me, and I turn my attention to the man in front of me. Mira drops my hand.

I sheathe my knife as I step back, trying not to miss her nearness as she moves away.

"While you are in this kingdom, you will show respect to the people within these borders," I say, glancing between the two men.

"Sir, she is only a servant," the foolish man who grabbed her stutters. I can't believe people are actually this horrible.

"And you are only a noble," I nearly snap. "A title that's lost as easily as the hair on your head." I make a point to glance at his balding scalp. "She is a living being, and you will treat her as such. Now go."

The last part is added quickly, because honestly, I'm losing control of my emotions. I have a feeling that if this man speaks again, I will punch him right in the face, regardless of Mama's political aspirations.

Maybe there's something in my face, but they don't test me. They just bow slightly and walk away without looking at Mira. When I turn toward her, I see she has made it to the other side of the hallway. The basket she discarded on the floor is in her hands again. She's pacing.

"Are you okay?" I ask, walking toward her.

"What were you thinking?" She gets right in my face before realizing what she's doing. Then she takes a step back.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I could've handled myself. But you could've caused an across-kingdoms scandal. What were you going to do? Stab him in the face?"

"I was thinking of cutting off one of his hands. Probably the right one. He looked right-handed to me."

Mira stares at me as if I've lost my mind, and I grin.

"No, don't smile at me like that. This is not funny." She points a finger in my direction. "You're the prince. You have to—"

"Have to what?" It's my turn to get a little irritated. "To stand by and watch you get assaulted? I'm pretty sure you're the one who told me to use my powers for good."

"Not on my behalf!" Her voice rises, and that's when it hits me there's more to this than just keeping peace between kingdoms or me being the prince.

"Mira—"

"No, no one stands up for me. I'm a nobody. You shouldn't have put yourself in danger for me. You—"

She's babbling now, and I do the only thing I can think of. Stepping forward, I catch her face between my palms, stopping her pacing and forcing her to look up at me. When her eyes meet mine, I find they're glistening with barely-held-back tears. My heart breaks and heals all in the span of a moment.

"I would do it again in a second. Mira, they wouldn't have hurt me. I'm okay. The kingdom is okay."

I can't believe I'm reassuring her about myself when I should be making sure she's okay. But I can't seem to ask the questions. She stands frozen, looking up at me as I cradle her face in my hands.

"Did they—are you okay?" I ask, and she nods.

"They didn't touch me. Besides what I'm sure you saw," she says. My whole body feels lighter with those words. Not that any of the harassment she received is okay, but at least I got here before it could get worse.

"I did see and then I didn't think. I acted."

“That was very foolish of you, Prince.”

“I’ve heard that somewhere before.” I chuckle and then she smiles, and I think that I could spend hours trying to make her do that again. That’s when I realize I’m still holding her face. She’s still looking at me. I would give anything to lean down and taste those lips of hers.

This has become a habit of mine, a desire I can’t seem to shake. I have no idea what to do about it. Mira seems to realize our predicament at the same time, and she—once again—is the smart one who takes a step back. My hands fall to my sides, and we watch each other for a moment before I motion down the hall.

“May I escort you to the kitchen?” I ask. When she nods, we turn together in that direction.

MIRA

A FEW HOURS LATER, THE PRINCE FINDS ME NEAR THE KITCHEN, EMPTY TRAY IN MY HANDS.

“Good evening, Mira,” he says. When I turn to look at him, my heart skips a beat. Just the sheer sight of him and the way my name sounds on his lips does it. He’s saved me twice in the span of a day, and now I can’t stop thinking about him no matter how hard I try. And I’ve been trying for hours.

“Good evening, Your Royal Highness,” I say. No matter what, I can't think of him as Luca. I have to think of him strictly as the prince. I think he knows what I'm doing. He gives me a small smile.

“Are you busy?” he asks. I look down at the tray and think about all the other things I have to do before I leave. But for some reason, I can’t find it in me to say yes. So I ask him a question instead.

“Is there something you needed?”

His face broadens in a grin, his green eyes sparkling.

“*Da*. I have a project I think could use your expertise.”

Okay, now I'm definitely curious. He motions with his head for me to follow him, and I set the tray down near the kitchen doors before I do.

He leads me upstairs to the part of the palace I haven't really explored, considering the celebrations are downstairs. I only went up here when we hid in that closet, and I’m trying really hard not to have that become a core memory. I think it might be too late for that.

We walk silently, and I let myself admire the grandeur of the space around me. It feels a lot more modern, in a human realm kind of sense, more so than the rest of the palace. Instead of paintings on the walls, there are photographs. Some are in black and white and some in color. The only reason I know what these are is because of a visiting trader from the human realm who came into the bakery and showed off a Polaroid camera.

Luca stops in front of a door, giving me a nervous glance before pulling the doors open.

“So, this is my room,” he says. His nervousness definitely makes sense now because I’m feeling it as well.

“Your room? What kind of project do you have in mind?” I ask. His eyes grow big, and my heart nearly stops because I cannot believe I just said that to the prince of my kingdom.

“Well, it is something that involves hands,” he replies. Now I'm blushing furiously. “I’ll be nice, I promise.”

“Luca!” I gasp, and he chuckles. Then he stops, twisting to look at me. His eyes are big as he

stares at me, and there's something behind that gaze I'm too terrified to name. Then I realize I called him by his first name.

"Come on," he says softly, leading me inside. I try to remind myself to breathe, hoping my face isn't as red as I'm sure it is, because my whole body is on fire.

Luca leads me past everything to the opposite side of the room where huge glass doors are half-open. He pushes them aside and motions for me to step in front of him.

When I do, I'm greeted with the most beautiful garden. It's a tiny little space but it's lush and loved, and I can't help but step forward into it. The circular space is filled with shelves of plants while large trees stand like soldiers at the back. There's a tiny space between two of the trees that leads farther into the mini forest, but it's the shelves that draw my attention.

"Are these…the herbs?" I ask, glancing down at the rows and rows of seeded plants.

"Yes."

When I glance at him again, he looks a little bewildered, like he can't believe he's actually sharing this side of himself with me. I can't believe he is either.

My mind drifts back to the dance and the way his hands felt on my waist, the way his eyes sparkled in the moonlight, and suddenly, I can't breathe. I don't know if it's because I am suffocating in this beauty or if it's because the emotions inside me are becoming way too much.

"So, what is this project?" I ask because this is what I do. I shut my emotions away, and I process later.

I simply have to focus on the fact that we are two different people from two different worlds. He is asking me for help and that is what I'm going to do. Help. And not focus on how handsome he looks right now.

"I wanted to make a bowl of plants for Mama. As a gift." He shrugs a little, and I find that small gesture cute. "I was thinking of planting the seeds in a way that paints a picture once the plants grow. I just got stuck on the picture. And since you were rearranging plants when we met—"

"You wanted to see if I could help," I finish for him. I can't help but grin. It's such a sweet gesture. He really is so sweet. I also need to stop noticing these things.

"Of course," I say. "Tell me what to do."

He pulls out a large ceramic planter that looks like a huge bowl. It will take two of us to carry it once it's filled. He brings over a collection of rocks, soil, and seeds, and I take a step back to think it over as he starts packing the rocks into the bottom.

"What about a mini garden?" I ask. "We could plant the taller herbs here and here, to act as trees." I point to the sides and then use my finger to guide a weaving path through the bowl. "Then we make a little walkway with the rocks through the garden. And make mini planters here, here, and here. We can do lavender here and mint on this side. What do you think?"

I glance up to find his eyes on me. For a moment, I think he's missed everything I said, but then he nods.

"I like it. It's perfect. Especially since she'll use it, so she can keep it trimmed, and it won't get out of hand."

"Great!"

He brings out different seeds. I don't miss the way he has everything organized in small, labeled containers. This is truly one of his passions, and it opens up a different side of him.

We work in silence, but it doesn't feel awkward. It feels…comfortable almost. Kind of like how it feels to work in the kitchens with Oksana, but I've known her my whole life. It shouldn't be the same thing, yet, here we are. I look over everything we've planted, satisfied with how it's going.

“Are you going to magic them into growing?” I ask. That seems like the easiest thing to do if he wants to give this to his mama now. It makes me a little excited to be honest, considering I’ve never seen real magic performed in front of me. But he only looks at me and shakes his head before getting back to work.

“They're just going to grow naturally?”

“They’ll have to.”

I look at him with a question in my eyes. That doesn’t make sense. Why would he wait if he can just make it happen? He watches me for a moment longer, as if coming to some decision. Then he says something that completely boggles my mind.

“I don't have any magic.”

I don’t think I’ve heard him correctly, but he doesn’t elaborate.

“What do you—what do you mean? You don't have magic?” I risk the question, and he meets my gaze with pain in his eyes.

“I don’t. I never manifested like my mama.”

I open my mouth to ask more questions, but then I stop. I can’t imagine how he must be feeling. His mom is the greatest *volshebnitsa* who’s ever lived, and he doesn't have any magic at all. That’s a lot of responsibility to carry on his shoulders, coupled with the fact that he’s the next ruler. My heart hurts on his behalf.

“I’m sorry,” I say because I think he needs to hear it. He only shakes his head. I press on. “No, I mean it. That must be tough. It's a lot of pressure on you as a ruler and as a son. I’m sorry it’s something you have to go through.”

He glances at me sharply. There's so much emotion there that I think I'm going to be swallowed by it.

I have to fight the urge to step forward and fold him into my arms. This man, this kind and generous prince, has so much on his plate. I’ve misjudged him in so many ways, and I wish I could tell him just how much I believe in him. Because I realize that I do. He’s going to be a great king someday. That means he really shouldn’t be spending all this time with a mere servant. The reality of that truth is like a bucket of cold water.

“*Spasibo*, Mira.” His voice carries more emotion than I can deal with, so I give him a smile and change the subject.

“I heard you met a mysterious princess?” Those are somehow the first words out of my mouth. I almost berate myself. He glances at me curiously but gets back to rearranging the rocks on the path.

“*Da*. Were you at the dance?”

I’m finding it difficult to lie to him, so I spin the truth a little.

“I’m sure you would’ve noticed me running around with baskets full of bread.” I try a chuckle, but it comes out strained.

“I would’ve.”

I don’t look up at his tone, concentrating on the task at hand. Clearly, I feel like punishing myself further because the next thing I say is,

“Tell me about the princess.”

CHAPTER

TWENTY

LUCA

I still can't believe I told her the truth about my magic. When she mentioned growing the seeds, it's like I couldn't stop myself if I tried. But the moment I said the words out loud, I didn't regret them. That leaves me curious.

Now, she's asking me about the mysterious princess.

"There's not much to tell. She didn't even give me her name," I say, glancing at Mira. She has a look of concentration on her face that I find quite endearing. Tearing my gaze away, I try to focus on what I'm doing instead of on the girl beside me.

She has this way about her that makes me want to tell her all my secrets. It's not a compulsion I've ever had before. There are things I don't even talk to my parents about, and they are the two closest people to me.

"Do you know where she's from?"

"I don't. Why the sudden interest?"

"I don't think it's sudden." She chuckles. "It's normal to wonder what kind of person the future king might marry."

That stops me cold.

"Marry?" I'm not sure how we arrived here, but we're actually having this conversation. "What makes you think I'll marry her? I just met her."

"Well, maybe I'm really asking *if* you'll marry her," she admits. For some reason, my heart calms at that. Marriage isn't something I'm comfortable talking with Mira about for some reason, but maybe not the reason anyone would assume. I told myself I'd make better choices when it came to Mira, but I still went searching for her, even when I told myself that's not what I was doing. Now, here we are. Having all kinds of personal conversations.

"You're asking what kind of girl I would marry," I say, slowly, watching her for a response. She's bent at the waist, focusing on rearranging the seeds, so I can't see her face. I decide I want to be honest, since I'm being honest about everything else, apparently. Taking a deep breath, I answer.

"I'd marry someone who was kind and generous, with a sweet spirit, but also someone who can stand up for what she believes in. Someone not afraid to get her hands dirty, I suppose. Someone—" I stop suddenly, because I realize I'm describing Mira. This isn't fair to either of us. I shouldn't be doing this, not to myself, not to her.

I don't want to push her into anything, even though I like her. I've stopped trying to convince myself otherwise. But I would never want to force anything between us if she doesn't feel the same.

Sometimes, I have no idea how she feels, even though other times I think we may be on the same page.

I know the mysterious princess is someone who has status and could help the kingdom. I understand a noble or royal marriage is what my parents and the public would expect of me. Clearly, if Mira's reaction and questions are any indication, it was her first thought too.

Why are we even having this conversation? Why can't I just ask Mira how she feels, or tell her how I feel? The pressure of responsibility weighs heavily on my shoulders. I sigh.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is that I'm not sure who I'd marry."

"But a princess would be the best option."

It's not a question, and the words are spoken low, but I reply anyway. Because I feel like I have to.

"*Da*."

"For the good of the kingdom," Mira says, standing up straight and turning to face me. There's something about the way she's looking at me that's different than before. Not worse or better, just different. It doesn't feel like it has anything to do with my magic confession and everything to do with this roundabout conversation we're having.

"For the good of the kingdom," I repeat. She nods, giving me an almost sad smile before turning to the giant bowl we put together.

"I think it's ready," she says. I tear my gaze away from her to stare at the bowl. Even though I can't magic it to grow faster, I can see in my mind's eye how it'll look once everything sprouts. It's going to be beautiful.

My eyes shift to Mira and the way she's studying the planter with a small smile on her lips, as if she too can picture it. I like seeing her smile.

This is getting dangerous, but I don't know if I can stop the spiral.

MIRA

I'M RUNNING ON EMPTY. WHEN I WOKE UP THIS MORNING, IT WAS STILL DARK OUTSIDE. MY BODY IS beyond exhausted and functioning on barely two hours, if that, of sleep each night. I finished painting the wall in the garden, hoping the rain would stay away long enough for it to dry. The sitting room is also finished, and I've moved on to the dining room. At least here, the space is smaller, so there isn't as much space to move things around, limiting how I can rearrange everything. I moved the furniture to the center of the room and set up a bucket and a rag in one corner. I'll be coming straight back after I help Oksana at the palace and finish this off. I only have four days before Feodora and the girls return.

I can't even imagine how it will feel having them back under this roof with me. I've enjoyed the peace and quiet. Well, when I am home. My eyes land on my journal. I wish I had time to spend writing in it right now. It would help me sort out my emotions when it comes to the prince.

Oksana got me a second dress from Miss Sofia, so I put that on and take the dirty dress with me to drop off at the bakery. Tetia Rosa is doing laundry today.

Even with that help, I'm still late to the palace. But thankfully, no Feodora run-ins happen this morning.

"Mira, don't take this the wrong way, but you look dead on your feet," Oksana says when I finally make it to the kitchens. I give her what I hope is a reassuring smile before tying the apron around my waist.

"I'm okay," I say when the smile clearly doesn't work.

"You need rest. You won't let me help at the house, and you stay here late."

"You can't help at the house because you have your own responsibilities, and I'm not staying that late." I contradict her, but she's not having it. There's concern in her gaze when she looks at me. I don't know how to reassure her. She won't believe anything I say. She can see right through my words. Years of friendship and all that.

"Really, Oksana. I can work. I may be a little grumpy, but I can still twirl the dough into rolls."

Oksana smiles. "I don't think you know the meaning of true grumpy," she says. "But actually, can you deliver the breakfast rolls to the courtyard, please?"

She doesn't meet my eyes as she asks, and I narrow mine.

"Oksana, are you scheming again?"

"I would do no such thing," she replies. I roll my eyes. Arguing with her won't do me any good, either. I give her my fiercest glare, even though she's not looking at me, and grab a tray.

I would much prefer to hide in the kitchens all day, but apparently, that's not happening. As usual, people flock to me as soon as I step out with a fresh tray. Oksana is basically famous at this point. I plaster a smile on my face, hoping it doesn't look as tired as I feel.

It doesn't take me long to move through the courtyard. I make sure to keep an eye out for a certain royal, but there's no sign of him. That is for the best.

Something I keep having to remind myself of, apparently.

I give myself a moment to admire the ancient tree. Seeing it makes my heart full and my smile a little more genuine.

When I'm out of rolls, I head back to the kitchens. Right before I get there, I hear my name called. I turn to find Queen Calista coming toward me.

"*Dobroe utro*, Your Majesty," I say, giving her a little curtsy. She waves off the curtsy, reaching for my hand.

"*Dobroe utro*, Miraslava," she replies with a smile. "Do you have a moment?"

As if I could say no to the queen. She leads me away from the main courtyard and back the way she came. I don't speak, waiting her out because I have no idea what this could be about.

"You had quite a day yesterday," she begins when we're out of earshot of others in the kitchen. Surprised, I glance over at her. She gives me a knowing look. "People like to talk."

That they do. Honestly, I'm surprised there isn't more talk when it comes to Luca and me. He's not being subtle when it comes to—whatever it is he's doing.

"I apologize for causing a scene. I'm not sure what came over me."

Queen Calista studies me quietly, as if trying to come up with a solution to some problem I don't understand. She glances past me, toward the other end of the hall, away from the courtyard. I don't turn to see what caught her attention. My body feels like it has a horse sitting on its shoulders.

"Come with me," Queen Calista finally says. Then she leads me over to the walkway that connects this hallway to the next. That's when I realize we're heading toward the garden I came through yesterday. Once again, I don't speak. When we finally reach the garden, the queen leads me to one of the benches, motioning for me to sit.

"He likes you, you know," she finally says, making me sit up a little straighter. My limbs are definitely upset with being this overworked, but her words perk me up.

However, I don't speak. I don't want to say something that may come off as wrong or insensitive or unkind. My mouth has a mind of its own sometimes, especially when I'm so tired. It's best to have her show her cards first. At least that's something Papa taught me when I was younger.

Queen Calista smiles, as if she knows what I'm doing. She glances over her shoulder, nodding her head in that direction. I follow her gaze to find her giant cat, peering at me from the trees.

That's when I realize she's not talking about Luca. She's talking about Kot-Bayun. The fact that I thought, even for a second, that she meant her son just shows how tired I am. As if a prince would ever actually be interested in someone like me.

"You know about that too." I say it like a statement, and she turns her attention back to me.

"Kot-Bayun told me himself." She waits for a reaction, as if she's making sure what I heard is correct.

"He talks to you?"

"In a way. We have a connection." She smiles fondly, a faraway look entering her gaze for a moment. "You know, he never would've helped you if he didn't see what kind of heart you have. He's guided by hearts, so to speak."

There's a question in her words, one I can't answer without admitting I snuck away from my family to be here. Instead, I focus on the very thing that brought me here in the first place. I told myself to be brave, didn't I?

"Queen Calista, would it be okay to ask you a question? About the human realm?"

"Of course."

"Was it—" I'm trying to phrase the question in the right way, but it's hard without giving her all the context. "Was the human realm really a land of opportunity that's different from here?"

She gives me that queenly stare of hers, the one that makes me feel like she's looking right through me. I think she's choosing her words carefully as well.

"I think any place is a land of opportunity if you are brave enough to take the necessary steps." I let that sink in as she continues. "Sometimes, people look for a way out when a way out is already right in front of them. Sometimes, running away is the best option."

My eyes meet hers at that. I wonder if there's some way she suspects the truth about my current family situation, about Feodora. There's a question in her eyes, and I can't seem to bring myself to answer it. If I say the words out loud, they'll make it all real somehow. And if I'm honest, a part of me feels ashamed. Ashamed that I've put up with Feodora's abuse for as long as I have, even though a bigger part of me knows what I've been doing is surviving the best way I know how.

Queen Calista sighs as she watches me, as if she can hear my thoughts. I suddenly have the greatest desire to ask her for a hug. But I don't, curling my hands into fists in my skirt instead.

"You want to go to the human realm?" she asks.

"I do," I reply without hesitation. "I've been saving up to petition the kingdom for passage before I'm of age." The words escape me in a rush, like they've been waiting to be said. Something flickers in her gaze, but it's gone before I can process it. When she smiles at me again, it's a little different. There's a tiny undercurrent of sadness there, I think. Or maybe I'm projecting.

If I leave, I will never see her…or Luca… ever again. Even though I'm trying not to let myself dwell on that last part, it still stings when I think about it.

"If you think that's the best for you then it can be arranged. The day after the final ball, come see me, and we will get it taken care of." She reaches over and gives my curled fingers a small squeeze. "If you think that's for the best."

There's definitely something she's not saying, something that led her to find me in the first place

today. But all my exhausted brain can hold onto is the fact that I have a way out. She approved it. I'm closer than I've ever been before.

My soul attained its waking moment:
You re-appeared before my sight,
As though a brief and fleeting omen,
Pure phantom in enchanting light.

And now, my heart, with fascination,
Beats rapidly and finds revived
Devout faith and inspiration,
And tender tears and love and life.
- Alexander Pushkin

CHAPTER

TWENTY-ONE

MIRA

"Are you going to tell me about it?" Oksana asks much later, as we're putting the finishing touches on one of the cupcake displays. For a second, I don't want to. Just like before, I feel like saying it out loud is going to mess with things. But Oksana deserves to know. So, I pull her to the side and give her a rundown of the events of the last two days. She listens with her mouth agape, so I reach over and shut it for her.

"How…what…why…I—" She gapes at me again, and I can't help but grin.

"Did you finally run out of words?"

"I'm processing." She plops down on a stool, placing her hands on her knees so she can rest her body there all dramatically. "It's a good thing Lubov has been tweaking the dress because you are definitely going tonight."

"What?" I nearly shout that word, glancing quickly over my shoulder and dropping down on my knees in front of Oksana. "I can't go."

"I don't comprehend these words that are coming out of your mouth." My friend looks at me, a gleam of mischief in her eye.

"Oksana, please. I shouldn't be anywhere near him. Or Feodora and the girls. I'm not done with the chores, and I'm tired, and—"

"And you're freaking out because you like him."

"*Nyet*."

"*Da*."

"*Nyet*." I narrow my eyes. She opens her mouth, and I point a finger at her. "Don't you dare."

She stays quiet for a few moments before she reaches out and takes my hand.

"Tell me something, Miraslava. Looking at your life fifty years from now, are you going to regret not going to the dance?"

Da. Yes. Of course.

All three statements rush into my mind immediately, and Oksana grins, not even needing a verbal answer from me.

"Then you know what to do, don't you?"

"I guess I'm going to the dance," I say, resigned. There's no way Oksana will let this go, and I'd be lying to myself if I protest any longer.

That's how I find myself in Oksana's house two hours later with her family fussing over me.

If I'm being honest, I'm eating up all this fussing like it's the most precious gift in the world.

Because for me, it is. There's no pretense here. They truly care about me, and I hold that in my heart as tightly as I can. When I leave Skazka, I'll be leaving them too. Although, it would be much easier for Oksana to come visit me there than it's been for her while I'm still here. We've already had dozens of conversations about it and made plans for various things we'll do.

"Can you please stay still?"

"I am."

Oksana points down, and I follow her gaze to where I'm making circles with my toes. I don't even realize I'm doing it, my mind is so hyper-focused.

This double life is getting extra exhausting. My heart is beating out of my chest every time I think about the dance. I can't tell whether it's beating for Luca or for my stepfamily.

Both are terrifying. In different ways.

"Sorry, I just—" I don't even know how to explain what I'm feeling right now.

"You're nervous, but you don't have to be. The magic of the slippers clearly works, and you're wearing a different dress today, so you should be less recognizable."

"What do you mean, a different dress?" I turn, receiving another reprimand from Oksana as she positions my face toward herself.

"Lubov has modified the dress you wore, adding a few different layers and colors, and you'll be wearing a different mask." She walks over to the table, pulling out a mask that looks like it might be an animal.

"Is that a fox?" I ask as she brings it over. Oksana smiles.

"It is. Isn't it beautiful? Mama stitched it herself."

The material isn't porcelain like other masks I've seen of similar design. Instead, it's silky, with ribbon and lace and colorful stitching woven throughout. It would cover my upper face and end right below my nose, barely leaving my mouth visible. Small ears stick out from the top, adorned with tiny jewels. The eye holes are rimmed with tiny sparkling beads. The color of the mask itself is white with lavender stitching and lace accents.

"I can't possibly wear this," I say. I sound like a broken record. But they keep giving and giving, and I feel like I have only inadequate words of gratitude in return.

"Ma would be very sad if you didn't. It doesn't fit our faces, so she's been keeping it in a box on her shelf, but it's perfect for you."

"How do you know that?"

"Because Lubov measured you for the mask she made you before, and I checked."

Of course.

"Oksana, why am I even going to this?" I ask, looking up at my friend. "I thought we agreed that I go to the first dance, you go to the second while I check on the kitchen, and then we both serve the last night."

"I'm sorry, what? I don't remember this conversation at all," my friend says. "The staff members are taking turns going to the dance. I took my turn and spent it with Yura. You spent it at the dance. Now you're going to do me a favor and spend another night at the dance."

"First of all, that makes no sense. Second of all, Yura." I say his name and then wiggle my eyebrows. My friend blushes the reddest color I've ever seen on her. I love this for her.

"Stop it. Nice try though."

Every time I bring him up, she clams up. I know that's just how she is. She needs to understand her feelings first before she speaks them out loud. But the happiness on her face is unmistakable.

When Lubov comes into the room, she's wheeling a portable hanger contraption. I stand to face

her and the dress, and my breath catches at the sight. It has the same lace quarter sleeves, the same open shoulders, both still white. But the skirt of the dress is bigger, and a few layers of light shimmering blue have been added on top. The underskirt is still full of purples and silvers, but even with this slight change, the dress looks new and matches the mask perfectly.

"You are an artist," I breathe out. Lubov grins.

"Keep telling me that, I like hearing it," the younger girl says, motioning me forward. "Now, let's get you into it."

"I'm going to pin your hair back on both sides, and up, *da*?" Oksana asks after the dress is on. I smooth the material over my stomach, the magic of a pretty dress doing its thing. It doesn't even have to be real magic for me to feel a boost of confidence. When I try a twirl, Oksana and Lubov both step back.

"I think we lost her, sis," Lubov comments.

"I'm still here," I reply, stopping the twirl and facing the girls. "It's just so beautiful."

The sisters grin at me and then get down to business. Lubov gets to go to the ball with her family tonight, and even though they know who I am in this dress, the magic of the slippers should technically disguise me even from them. I'm not sure how that works. I know Oksana knew who I was because she saw me step into the shoes, but after I left her, she said all she saw was the mysterious princess. Magic has its own rules, clearly.

Oksana finishes pinning my hair and then I don the mask. When I turn to look at myself in the mirror, even I hardly recognize myself. Lubov hands me the cloak I'm going to wear to get to the palace, and then I walk over to the shoes.

"Please let them work again," I say, right before I step into them.

LUCA

"WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?" MAXWELL LEANS OVER, GIVING ME A KNOWING LOOK. I FIGHT THE urge to roll my eyes in case anyone is watching, which they most certainly are.

"Shouldn't you be dancing with your wife?" I reply, raising my eyebrows.

"Absolutely not," Maxwell replies just as Papa drops to the seat beside mine.

"Jemma and Cali are gossiping," he announces.

"They're grown adults," I say.

"Why does that matter?" Maxwell replies. All three of us look over to the tree with ever-blossoming flowers where Mama and Jemma sit, their heads bent close together. There's pure joy on their faces as they laugh at something. I can't help but smile.

"So, who is my son looking for?" Papa's question brings my attention to our table. We're sitting in a corner, a little away from everyone, but in a perfect position to observe. Since my parents are so good at being among their people, they're not constantly bombarded for attention and can enjoy themselves like normal party-goers. But I know for a fact we're still watched and talked about. The gossip mill never sleeps.

"No one," I reply, making a face at Maxwell, which he ignores.

"The mysterious princess, of course."

Actually, I was looking for Mira. But if I admit that, I'm pretty sure that'll raise even more questions.

Maybe she's not coming tonight. Maybe I scared her away with my truths. Or maybe she's working and doesn't have time to think about me.

"I'm sure your princess will be here—oh, there she is." I follow the direction Maxwell is looking, and there she is. Today, she's dressed in a more blueish dress with the same large flowy skirt and iridescent glow to her. Her mask is different, a fox maybe, and there are no painted vines on her skin. But even with the slight changes, it's her.

She turns, as if she feels my eyes on her, and then I'm standing before I even decided to do so. Maxwell says something, but I'm not paying attention. The invisible string that pulled me toward her two nights ago is back. I weave in and out of dancing couples, walking straight across the dance floor, instead of around it, to reach her.

"*Dobroy vecher,* Your Royal Highness," she says with a small curtsy when I stop in front of her.

"*Dobroy vecher*, Princess," I find myself replying, unable to look away from her. There's something magical about her, like she's a beautiful painting filled with color and life. I couldn't take my eyes off her, even if I tried. "Care for a dance?"

Extending my hand, I wait for her to make the decision. She left rather abruptly last time, leaving me with a ton of questions. I would like the opportunity to ask them now, but I won't push. However, I see that I don't have to worry. She places her gloved hand in mine, and I lead her to the busy dance floor.

Even though I know people are watching us, I can't force my attention away from her. Stepping forward, I place one hand on her waist as she gently lays hers on my shoulder. The fingers of our other hands curl against each other and then we begin to move.

Just like the first time, there is no hesitation in the way we anticipate each other. She allows me to lead, and she follows, but it's more of a combined effort than with anyone else I've ever danced with before. It's almost as if we've been doing this for years.

"The mask and dress are stunning," I say, my throat dry all of a sudden.

"*Spasibo*, Your Royal Highness."

"Please, call me Luca," I reply just as we spin. Her hair fans out around her, suspended in the air by some invisible force, before falling around her shoulders once more. The purple is a perfect contrast to her dress and complexion, and for a moment, I'm mesmerized. Well, I seem to be mesmerized at all moments with her.

She still hasn't given me her name, and she didn't say anything to my invitation to use my given name. It should bother me, but for some reason, it doesn't.

We turn together and then I spin her out. She does the move gracefully, allowing her body to carry her out and then bring her back to my side. The fabric of her skirt settles around us, creating a barrier of sorts.

When the music stops, I'm reluctant to let her go. She moves a few steps back and gives me a curtsy. I have to remind myself to bow.

"Will you come with me? I want to show you something," I find myself asking. She hesitates, a moment of indecision in her eyes, but then she nods slowly.

"I can't stay long."

"So mysterious." I smile, surprising myself. This pull I feel toward her doesn't feel realistic. But I want to get to know her more, and talking with all these listening ears around won't yield me the answers I seek. Of that I am sure.

Without a moment to spare, I lead her off the dance floor and toward the hallway into the castle. Instead of turning toward the front entrance of the castle, I lead her in the opposite direction, passing a few inquiring gazes. I make sure to smile, but inside, my chest feels like it'll beat out of my chest. Any moment now, she'll change her mind, turn, and disappear.

But she doesn't.

When we're finally out of the noise of the party, I lead her to one of the gardens at the back of the castle. This one is one of my favorites, but I guess I can say that about each of them. Just for different reasons.

This particular garden borders the outer wall that leads into the forest. Here, the trees are much bigger. They've grown larger because they once belonged inside the *Volshebnii Les*. When Mama moved into the castle, she simply built a barrier around them for protection. The forest allowed it, and now we have a direct connection to it.

The trees are evergreen and smell like every good holiday memory I have from my childhood. When I glance behind me, I find the princess at the entrance, looking up into the tall peaks. There's wonder on her face, the same wonder I experience any time I'm near nature. It makes me smile.

"This garden is different," she says, tearing her gaze away from the trees and meeting mine.

"It is. Mama wanted a direct link to the forest, so she put up a wall in between the trees without disturbing the integrity of it."

The princess nods, turning her gaze back to the trees. I wish she'd look back at me. What is this strange reaction I'm experiencing to her? It's as if all the other girls I've ever met have ceased to exist.

Save one.

For a moment, it feels as if she's here with me. But I push the thoughts of her away because that wouldn't be fair to the one who stands in front of me. The need to get to know her grows the more I see the way her eyes light up at the sight of the forest.

It's as if I recognize her on some otherworldly level. My inner self understands the girl who stands in front of me, as if we've met before. And not the fast meeting of a dance and a flirtation. A true, real meeting of the souls.

It makes no sense, and yet, it feels right, somehow. It's why I brought her here.

"Shall we walk?"

She looks at me once more and then smiles. With a nod, we step farther into the path between the trees, leaving the party behind.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-TWO

MIRA

As we walk, my mind fills with a million thoughts. Why am I here? How am I here? Luca keeps stealing glances at me, and I only know because I'm doing the same thing.

I can't help it. He looks mighty handsome in his dark navy jacket and slacks. He's not wearing a costume like the others. His suit is without any embroidery or patches. It's simple, yet it looks regal on him somehow. Probably because of his broad shoulders and toned…well, everything. The man does know how to fill out a piece of clothing. That's something I've been noticing and then lying to myself about noticing.

"You still won't tell me your name. Why is that?" Luca's voice reaches out to me through the night. When I turn my head, I find his eyes already on me.

"It would make things more complicated," I reply honestly before I can think too much about the implications. During our last dance, we barely spoke. It was a fleeting experience and one I will carry inside me for the rest of my life. Now, this? It's another level. I think that maybe after the last few days, he's much closer to my heart than I'd like him to be.

"I'm good at complicated," he says. There's a bit of amusement in his eyes.

"Good for you," I reply, making him laugh. It's one of his freer laughs, the ones where he doesn't restrain himself like a good prince does. My own smile tugs at my lips.

"Tell me something about yourself. Besides your love for nature."

I glance at him sharply, and he grins.

"I saw the way you looked at the trees, and the way you studied the flowers and bushes in the courtyard. They fascinate you, and I think you love them."

"I do," I admit, because I can do nothing else. My mind flashes to the memory of working side by side with him in his garden. The garden he nourished with his own hands. Another memory I will never forget. But it's not like I can mention that. It reminds me once again that I am not me right now. I'm not Mira, the servant girl, but a pretty princess in a gorgeous dress.

The protection my disguise offers makes me braver than I'm feeling, so I decide to offer him some truths.

"My mama loved to garden. We would study all kinds of plants together, seeing what would grow in our soil and what wouldn't. It's one of my favorite childhood memories."

"Loved?" His voice is gentle when he asks, but I guess it's my fault that he's curious. I can't give him half the information and not think he'd want more.

"Yes. She's gone. So is my father."

"That must be very difficult."

My eyes find his once more, and in them, I find someone who understands loss. A dozen questions spring to mind, especially since I know his parents are alive. It must be someone else, someone who was very dear to him. There's no comparison for loss. It's a weight we carry in our hearts regardless of how it was delivered there. I have to fight the urge to reach for him.

"It is," is all I say, and somehow, I think he knows that I understand. The raw emotion in his eyes gives me courage, and suddenly, I want to say all the things I hold back as Mira.

"I don't come from a loving family," I admit. It feels necessary to put what I'm experiencing into words. Luca steps closer, and I can feel his eyes on me.

"Well, they were, my parents were the most loving people in this realm or the next. But then Mama passed away and my father remarried. Not for love, though. And since he's been gone—well I guess it doesn't matter."

"Why do you think your father married her if not for love?" Luca sounds genuinely curious. It's not the question I expected, but it's one I've thought about for years.

It never made sense to me after he was gone. But in those first months after Feodora and the girls came to live with us, I truly thought Feodora could love my father. She played her part well, the same way I've seen her play other people in the years since. And even though I knew no one could replace the love Papa had for Mama, he searched for companionship.

"I think," I begin, "he was trying to love her the best way he knew how. And she played the part of someone who could be loved by him. They both needed something from each other. He, a companion. She, the security his money provided." I know I sound callus, but somehow, I can't keep my feelings hidden. "The moment he was gone, so was the part of her that pretended at any kindness."

My eyes sting. I take a deep breath, keeping the tears at bay. I will not cry in front of the prince. Maybe being honest wasn't my best plan.

"What was his name?" I glance at Luca in surprise. That's definitely not what I expected. "Your father's?"

A part of me wants to make up a name, just to give myself some sort of protection, but I find that I can't bring myself to do so.

"Mikhail," I reply. It feels strange on my tongue, like it's been years since I've said it. I think it has been. Luca glances at me, a question in his eyes, and I smile.

"Anastasiya," I say. "Mikhail and Anastasiya."

My parents. My legacy. I breathe their names in, holding them inside my lungs before I let out a breath.

"Beautiful."

I turn to him fully then. The emotions this conversation stirred up are right at the edges of my being. I think if the wind picked up even a notch, it'd blow me into pieces, like autumn leaves being ripped off branches.

There's something in the way Luca looks at me. Not the prince. Luca.

This look is entirely him, one filled with emotion and character and every little bit of himself he keeps locked away. My heart feels too big for my chest as he takes a step forward.

But even as he does, I realize he's not looking at me. Not really. He's not opening up to the servant girl who helped him plant a garden or tried to protect him from a giant cat. He's opening up to a stranger. That's when I realize that maybe he too needs the protection of a mask to share parts of himself.

If that's the case, then maybe that's my role in his life. This dance, this moment, can give him the

space he needs to verbalize the words he refuses to say otherwise.

"We may be strangers," I say, because I can't seem to stop myself, "but you can talk to me. I will keep your secrets, Luca."

He inhales sharply at my use of his name. It fills me up just the same. I never allow myself to think of him as Luca, but I can't help myself now. I care about this man, more than I should have allowed myself to do. In such a short time, he's become a part of me. It's the only way I can explain it, even to myself.

His eyes haven't left mine. There's a glow about him, as if he too feels everything I'm feeling. Logically, I understand that's not possible. But my heart wants to believe that we have connected on some cosmic level that transcends anything that can be put into words.

LUCA

When she says my name, something changes inside me. No matter how hard I try to figure out why I'm pulled toward this girl, I haven't come up with a single reason. But with my name on her lips, I can almost see beyond the glamour of her masquerade dress and mask. Her blue eyes shine brightly behind her mask. I wish she would take it off so I can see her face fully. There's a prickling sensation at the back of my neck, as if I'm missing something obvious, but I can't pinpoint it.

I didn't have any particular destination in mind, or any specific reason to bring her to this garden, only that I wanted to talk to her away from all the watchful eyes. Although, this will definitely cause some gossip. My parents will probably be wondering if I've found myself a match. They always say that time doesn't have meaning when you meet the person who's yours. It could be minutes or it could be years, but you find the person you want to get to know on that unique level.

But this mysterious princess isn't the one I picture when I think of who my person may be. Mira has been invading my every waking and slumbering thought. It's like I'm consumed by her. There's something about the way she is that just fills the missing spaces in my soul.

The moment that thought crosses my mind, the air nearly crackles around us. The princess looks around, but I'm looking at her. It's almost as if there's a ripple around her, or a glow. My own thoughts and the girl in front of me merge somehow. For a split second, I'm nearly convinced Mira stands in front of me. But then she looks at me and the feeling is gone.

Shaking my head, I try to clear my thoughts. This can't be Mira. I know her voice to the point where if I were lost in a storm and she called out my name, I would find my way to her. This princess in front of me is simply a different person.

This isn't fair to anyone, this back-and-forth emotional turmoil I seem to be experiencing. At least I feel no malice from her, no bad intentions in the way she speaks. If nothing else, maybe I can find a friend in her. That's something I haven't had in a long time. Yes, I have family. But a friend? I'd given those up a long time ago.

She's watching me curiously now, and I realize I never responded to her offer. Giving her a smile, I nod.

"Maybe one of these days I will share my secrets with you. I could use a friend."

There's a flash of emotion in her eye, too fast for me to decipher, but she gives me a small smile

anyway.

"I'd like that."

Just then, the clock strikes its first chime of midnight. It echoes around us, making her jump.

"It's been a pleasure, Your Royal Highness," she says. "But I must be off now."

Confusion clouds my thoughts. No one leaves so early, but I think she did the same thing last time. She arrived late and left early. It's almost as if she's hiding from something or someone.

She's already backing away toward the hallway, which will lead her out of the castle. But I can't just let her leave like that. I follow, and the moment we step back into the corridor, there are people to dodge. More of the party has spilled inside the castle, apparently. I didn't notice this before, but many of the visitors are wearing feathers today, on their heads in the form of crowns and on their backs in the form of wings. Either way, all the large feathers obscure my vision.

"Where's the fire?" Jemma pops up next to me as I stop at the courtyard entrance to see if the mysterious princess went through there.

"Did you see the girl I was with?" I ask.

"The pretty thing in that gorgeous fox mask? Not since you two snuck away together." Jemma wiggles her eyebrows at me, and it looks quite humorous on her.

"Jemma."

"No, I didn't see her come back here. Everything okay?"

"I don't know," I reply honestly. Then I squeeze Jemma's hand and go back into the corridor. But no matter where I look, I can't find her. The clock strikes its final chime as the hour turns to midnight, and the mysterious princess is gone.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-THREE

MIRA

I've almost made it out of the castle before the crowd of party-goers descends, but not quite. A group of noble couples step right in front of my path, laughing and bumping into each other. I try to go around them, but they seem to shift positions with me. Frustration runs through me. I need to be out of here before the final stroke of midnight. I may have my hiccups when it comes to magic, but I know one thing for sure. These slippers have done their job for the night. I'm not about to test them past the time I've been given in the precise instructions the old woman left for me.

When I think I can finally get past the group, another face catches my attention.

Feodora.

It's near impossible to miss her in any setting. She loves wearing outrageous colors, and I know she does it for attention. I've never been more thankful for her ghastly taste in clothes than now because I wouldn't have noticed her otherwise. The girls are nearby for sure, which means I need a diversion.

Pivoting, I do the only thing I can. I race toward the kitchens.

Stumbling inside, I nearly collide with one of the workers coming out. The man looks at me strangely, but I don't stop. Weaving in and out of the servants, I make a beeline for Oksana. When I stop in front of her, she startles, giving me a confused look. Clearly, the magic works even on her.

"Oksana, it's me. Mira. Get me out of here before the slippers stop working." My voice comes out fast and low, and Oksana's eyes grow large. Then she does a double take, giving me a once over, a bit of awe entering her eyes.

"Not now. Come on."

"Right, right. Cool magic though."

I shake my head at her as she calls out some instructions for one of her helpers, and then she's ushering me through the outside door. Grabbing a cloak from near the exit, she throws it over my shoulders, pushing me in front of her.

"I don't know where I'm going," I whisper. "I haven't taken this exit before."

This is where the guys bring in all the deliveries, so it's usually blocked by them unloading or loading stuff, depending on the time of the day. Oksana grabs my hand and tugs me behind her as she walks into another room. Then she turns right. I thought this door opened to the outside, but it apparently opens to a small storage room.

Then, we're near the exit.

The clock strikes its final chime, and Oksana pauses.

“I’ll be honest, the magic thing is cool and creepy at the same time.” She’s staring at me as if she doesn’t know what to do with me. “You’re you again.”

“That was way too close.”

“Well, what were you doing that got you so distracted?” Oksana raises her eyebrows at me with a knowing look. I simply glare.

“I behaved, unlike some people I know,” I say. She blushes, which makes me grin. But then I realize I’m still way too close to my stepfamily, and now I have to make my way home without the help of magic. Well, I need to stop at Oksana’s first to change my clothes.

“Thank you!” I say, reaching over to give her a hug. She hugs me back just as tightly.

“Stay to the shadows and don’t make eye contact.”

“Yes, Oksana,” I say before she pushes me gently in the direction of the vendors and the forest. I cross a small bridge built for the deliveries and then I stumble into the night, making sure to stay away from any well-lit places. My heart is still beating five kilometers a second. That was way too close, and I’m not safe yet.

However, when I make my way to the vendors, everyone is too busy laughing and eating to notice a girl walking around. Thankfully, people have had plenty to drink by now. I may be just a distant memory if anyone asks.

When I finally reach Oksana’s bakery, I grab the key from one of the planters and let myself in. Just like before, I change into my regular Mira dress and hang up the gorgeous outfit Lubov created for me. Taking a step back, I study it for a moment, still slightly unbelieving that I wore it. And danced with Luca.

No, the prince. The unknown princess danced with the prince.

I have to leave all of that behind. If seeing Feodora’s atrocious ensemble did anything for me, it was to remind me I don’t belong in that world, and Luca—the prince—does not belong to me. Every time I put on the pretty dress and the magical shoes, I forget my place in the world. I have to remind myself that it’s not near him.

Grabbing my bag, I leave the dress and the shoes behind, letting myself out the way I came in. It begins to sprinkle as I make my way home. The forest is unusually quiet around me, which makes me nervous. Nothing good ever comes from the shadows. There’s no time to let my mind wander or process my emotions as I try to keep an eye on my surroundings. My hand wraps around the knife I always carry on me, but I don’t pull it out of the secret pocket at the back of my trusty bag.

Besides the mysterious horsemen and that strange experience when I was sneaking into the castle, I haven’t seen any magical creatures this close to town. But that doesn’t mean they’re not there. *Volshebnii Les* is a forest brimming with magic, and the inhabitants therein are too. It’s why the horsemen worry me so. They can’t be a good omen, not after all these years of quiet existence.

But tonight, I don’t meet them or anyone else on my walk home. My clothes are slightly damp, and I’m tired. As usual, I light the fire in the kitchen first, heating up my physical body and making myself a cup of tea for the soul. There are chores still left on Feodora’s list, and I must have those done before they return home in mere days. Yet, for now, I can’t seem to make myself move except to take out my notebook and jot down everything that happened today. This little book will be the one memory I allow myself when I leave for the human realm.

A place where I’ll finally be free, even though I’ll be all alone.

LUCA

I BARELY SLEEP, TOSSING AND TURNING UNTIL I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE. IN THE EARLY LIGHT OF THE morning I take a walk, ending up near the sacred tree, where I find Kot-Bayun. He's been disappearing into the forest at night, keeping his distance so as not to disturb the guests. Mama mentioned that he might be hunting something, and that worries me. He doesn't exactly hunt regular prey.

But he's here now, watching me in that lazy yet intense way of his. His body is curled near two trees, his head resting on his paw, but his eyes follow my every move. It's early enough that no one is here yet. The remains of last night's party litter the ground. Kot-Bayun will disappear once the workers return, but for now, he rests near the tree. Something he loves to do.

"*Dobroye utro*, Kot-Bayun," I say, walking over to him. "I take it you wonder why I've disturbed you this early." The cat doesn't move. He simply continues to watch me.

For everyone else, even Maxwell and Jemma, there's a sense of fear when it comes to Kot-Bayun. But I grew up curled up next to him, and even though I know, logically, he could probably eat me in one bite, it doesn't prevent me from taking my seat near his middle, my back to his side.

He shifts a little but doesn't get up or push me away. After a moment, I hear a tiny purr, which brings a smile to my face. I reach over, scratching behind his ear. Now the purr vibrates the ground I sit on. He may be a killing machine, but he's also still a cat.

As I scratch him, he butts my hand a little, and I refocus on his inquisitive eyes. Mama has a special bond with Kot-Bayun. That's the whole reason he isn't evil and in the woods eating traveling soldiers. He likes the soldiers best, although I think he'd eat anyone. Since Mama conquered his heart, he eats anything and everything but not people. She is also the only one who can speak to him. Well, maybe speak isn't the correct word. They communicate almost telepathically, which is truly uncanny to watch as an outsider. But even though I can't talk to him directly, he's still there for me to talk to.

"It's a girl," I say, giving him a bit of a sad smile. He raises his head a little, looking to where he usually jumps the wall to the area near the sacred tree. This time, my smile is anything but sad.

"Yes, that girl." I chuckle. "And another. Although, I'm not sure why I think of them as one and the same. It isn't possible, but there were glimpses last night. I thought I was just being wishful, but the more I think about it, the more I think I was seeing something I wasn't supposed to. Does any of that make sense?"

The cat looks at me like I've lost my mind. I have to agree. I'm talking nonsense and feeling even more confusion coursing through my body. I wish I had a way of finding some answers. I could ask Mira, but I don't think she would tell me even if it was true. But why would a princess work as a servant? Or a servant pretend to be a princess?

None of this makes sense.

Suddenly, Kot-Bayun stirs, jumping to his feet. I would've fallen on my back if I hadn't caught myself. He steps right over me with a little happy pep in his walk. That's when I see Mama step into the courtyard.

“There’s my sweet boy,” she says, reaching up to pet Kot-Bayun. If his purr was vibrating the ground before, it feels like an earthquake now.

“He’s about to wake up the whole castle,” I point out, getting to my feet and dusting off my pants. Mama leans to the side until she sees me, a smile blossoming on her face.

“And there’s my favorite boy. Couldn’t sleep?”

“Not particularly,” I answer, walking over to where she stands with the cat plopping down at her feet and turning over on his back. “He is such a softy.” The cat growls immediately, but Mama is there to soothe him, chuckling.

“You know better than to insult him this early in the morning,” she says. I roll my eyes. A murderous creature, yet so sensitive. “What’s going on, Luca?”

“Just couldn’t sleep.”

I’m not sure why I decide not to talk to Mama about this. I talk to her about everything. But for some reason, right now, I just can’t bring myself to say the words. So, I change the subject.

“I’ve been meeting with the noble visitors,” I say, thinking about the mini dates I’ve been going on. “There hasn’t been anything except rumors of Baba Yaga’s resurgence.” It’s the same update I’ve given her before, but I still feel inclined to share it.

Mama looks thoughtful for a moment, and I wonder what’s going through her mind. The history she has with that *volshebnitsya* is something I will never understand. They worked side by side for a time, developed a partnership, only for Baba Yaga to stab Mama in the back. Mama’s bloodline, my bloodline, is that of the oldest and most powerful of *volshebnikov*, Koscheii Besmertnii. He’s the man whose heart was taken out and then hidden in a riddle, which ended in a box with a duck, a rabbit, an egg, and a needle. A funny way to hide a heart, but a tale from my childhood that ended up being the truth. Mama refused to have her legacy be darkness and pain, so she saved Skazka and crippled Baba Yaga’s magic.

But just like everything in this world, wounds heal, and Baba Yaga’s magic has too.

“I wasn’t really expecting someone to hand her over on a silver platter.” Mama sighs, and I can see the frustration on her face. “It’s inevitable for Baba Yaga to return. I just want to be here to make sure she’s stopped.”

“And if she can’t be?” It’s not a question I want to ask, but it’s one that needs to be asked. Mama turns to me, taking one of my hands in both of hers.

“Good will always overcome evil, Luca. Don’t ever forget that.” She squeezes my hand, as if making sure I’m paying attention. “Whether it is now or in a thousand years, she will return. Of that I have no doubt. You know what else I do not doubt? That we will prevail. This bloodline will prevail. We will take care of this land and our people.”

I’m quiet for a moment, thinking of all that entails, of all the possibilities it brings up. And the part I fear most.

“Even if I have no magic?”

“Oh, my sweet boy.” Mama places a hand against my cheek, and I fight back tears. I only ever get weepy around her, because she’s the only one who’s allowed to see me for all I am. “Magic isn’t what makes a king good. It’s what’s in your heart that matters. Love has always been and will always be the strongest magic of the land. Don’t ever forget that.”

For some reason, I think Mama is trying to tell me something, but I have no idea what. I hold onto her words just the same. For a while, we just sit there, holding each other. Mother, son, and a giant cat, safe in a tiny cocoon of this particular time and space, if only for a little while.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FOUR

MIRA

It's a good thing I work for my best friend because I'm late once again. I had to finish rewashing all the sheets in the house, and with the clouds overhead, I didn't want to leave them hanging out all day, so I brought them in and rehung them inside. Feodora would have a temper tantrum if she saw it. Luckily, she's not at the house right now. It'll be a lot of work to finish everything off her list before she returns, but I actually think I can do it.

There's no time to talk as Oksana and I dive into work. There are way too many people present in the kitchen today anyway. After what seems like the longest two hours of my life, Oksana finally sends me out to deliver breakfast to the arriving workers.

When I pass one of the rooms, I see Luca inside talking to the ambassador's daughter. He's been keeping up with his dates every day, but I've seen him with her the most. Maybe he's found a match.

I don't know why the thought brings a painful pang to my chest. I push it away, trying to ignore it. I have no right to feel anything when it comes to the prince. I've told myself this fact a thousand times. I might have to repeat it a thousand more.

The baked goods are picked off fast, and I'm on my way back to the kitchens when I hear someone mention the mysterious princess. Immediately, I slow down, inching closer to the voices. I realize it's a few of the ladies who are refreshing the tablecloths and chatting.

"The prince and that princess looked mighty cozy together," one of the women says. I can't see her face since she's facing the other direction, and I don't recognize her voice. "I've never seen her before. Can you imagine a foreigner on the throne?"

"You think he would do that? Make some stranger our queen?" another one of the ladies says. They don't see me because I'm on the other side of the pillar, but I can't help but listen.

"What other choice does he have? Pick one of the nobles from our land?"

"Or not a noble." That definitely perks up my attention. I hold my breath as I wait for the woman who started the conversation to respond. She doesn't right away, and that's when I realize she's laughing.

"Please, Olya, they would never put a commoner on the throne. Even King Brendon comes from a noble line of warriors. The king and queen's blood carries the purest of magic. They need someone with some gusto to keep it going, and no commoner I know carries any kind of magic."

I feel my chest deflate as tears prickle my eyes. Of course, they're right. They don't even know the struggles Luca—the prince—has had with his magic. He'll need the most powerful of allies, not only in the political sense but in bloodline. Magic is how the noble families earned their status in the first

place, ages ago. Isn't this what I've been thinking from the beginning? He would never go for me, not in the way that truly matters. This just proves it.

But then, after all the time we've spent together, I let myself forget where we stand. The loss of him feels like an overbearing wave, crushing down on me. I never truly had him. What was I thinking? This has to stop.

I have to stop.

Turning, I flee toward the kitchens, my heart in my throat. It was foolish of me ever to entertain thoughts of him. He's a world away, even when he's standing right beside me.

Realizing I must look like a crazed person running through the hall, I slow down, giving myself time to put away my emotions. I can't let Oksana see me like this. Thankfully, everyone is too busy at their assigned stations to be in the middle of the hall. But I'm not as alone as I think.

"*Dobroye utro*, Mira."

He always finds me. I feel him behind me before I even turn at his greeting. I've come to anticipate him, and I'm not sure how to deal with that realization.

"*Dobroye utro*, Your Royal Highness."

"Did you sleep well?" He's near the entrance to one of the rooms that opens up into the hallway, and he hasn't moved.

"I did. Thank you. And yourself?"

We're so polite, like strangers once more. I have no idea why we have this sudden dynamic. Maybe he's as confused as I am as to where we stand. I can't help remembering the way his arms felt around me as we danced. His mouth curls up in a tiny smirk, and it's like he can read my thoughts, which is impossible. A blush threatens to warm my cheeks so I duck my head.

"Yes, very well. Thank you."

He's far enough away that he doesn't notice my still-damp cheeks, and I'm grateful. The distance between us must grow. It's the only way I'll survive this. He must feel the same because he still hasn't moved.

"I heard about you and the princess." The words are out before I can stop them. Clearly, I have no sense of self-preservation. I should not be bringing her up, but here we are. I really am losing my mind, aren't I?

"*Ah*, the princess. What have you heard?" There's something in his voice as he asks, but I can't really pinpoint what. I am a turbulence of emotions. I have no way to understand his emotions if I can't even understand my own. But I open my mouth anyway, since I put myself in this position.

"I heard that…you've made a friend." I'm digging a much deeper hole, and I can't stop myself. I'm sure he can tell there's something in my voice, but he doesn't show it.

He steps up to me, and I notice rows of boxes in the room behind him. That's when I see his sleeves are rolled up, and he has patches of dust on his clothes. I hear some shuffling and then two men step up behind the prince, picking up the boxes and walking out of my sightline. I have no idea what they're working on, but clearly, Luca was helping. He's that kind of prince, one who works with his hands and spends time with his people, yet he's still a prince. His responsibilities—his life—will never be like my own. Still, I want to tell him he'll make a great king, but that's something the princess would say. And I'm not her.

"Well, yes, I made a friend," he says, crossing his arms in front of himself and leaning against the doorframe. "She keeps running away from me. Am I really so unlikable?" he asks with a note of amusement in his voice. I can't help but play along.

"I can only stand your personality in little bursts of time." I shrug and am rewarded with a

chuckle. A smile tugs at my own lips. I hate how my chest fills with warmth at the sight of him like this, at being the reason for that laugh.

"That makes perfect sense then. Is there anything I can do to help with that kind of…reception to my personality?"

"Not a thing. You're stuck. Forever."

This time when he laughs, his shoulders shake. I smile because it's the only thing I can do. As I look up at him, his clothes a little rumpled and his hair in disarray from work, I tell myself to remember this moment. Because once the celebration is over, I'll never see him again.

LUCA

SHE'S BEEN CRYING. I CAN TELL BY THE SADNESS IN HER EYES, EVEN THOUGH SHE'S TRYING HARD TO hide it. When I first saw her through the doorway, I nearly jumped toward her. My body reacted before my brain caught up. We've been packing up various supplies to send to the villages farther out in the kingdom, to those who decided not to come to the celebration or simply couldn't. My parents were in here for a few hours before they had to go mingle with the nobles, but I stayed. I have absolutely no desire to spend any time with the visiting nobles and ambassadors. I think Mama and I have given up on our plan of pretend dates to extract information. It wasn't working anyway. I could hide in this room working with my hands for the rest of the day and be satisfied.

But when I saw Mira, I had no control over myself. I was at the door greeting her before I could stop myself. Now I wish I could close the distance between us and hug all her worries away. Even as she smiles at me, there's a sadness brewing. I want to take it away.

"I guess I'm a lost cause then," I find myself saying now. The nagging feeling that I'm missing something that is staring me right in the face is back. Maybe it's only my own confusion when it comes to Mira that unsettles me so. It would be foolish of me to try to deny my feelings. But if they were so strong, would I be attracted to the mysterious princess? None of this makes any sense.

"I should be going, Your Royal Highness," Mira says while I'm having my mini crisis. She turns, but she's too close to the wall, and she slams into it with her tray. Without hesitation, I'm at her side, kneeling down to pick up the few pieces of bread that rolled away.

"I'm sorry I—" There's a note in her voice that tells me she might start crying again. My heart squeezes in awareness again, and I will do anything just to make sure she doesn't. So, I interrupt her.

"You know, you never call me Luca."

She freezes before she's done with her apology, glancing up at me sharply. I didn't realize how close we were, our faces just half a meter apart, not even a full arms-length. Her eyes are big and round as she inhales sharply. My eyes drop to her mouth. My body seems to have a mind of its own as I move forward just a fraction. But then Mira is on her feet. I close my eyes briefly to put away the desire rushing through my blood. She entices a physical response from me, which is something I haven't experienced on this level before.

I stand a little more slowly, not moving away. Mira is a little caught between the wall and my body. I'm still waiting for her to comment on what I said. It's like she's processing and trying to figure out the best way to say what she has to say. She used my given name once, and I remember the way it

sounded on her lips. My chest feels full as I try to inhale. I can see her own rising and falling a little faster than usual. She's not as immune as I always think she is. Maybe she's just better at hiding it.

"It wouldn't be appropriate." Her voice is barely a whisper, but her eyes are on mine.

"Why is that?" I cock my head to the side, watching her.

"It would—change—" She catches herself twice, as if she can't find the correct words. "It just wouldn't be appropriate." The last part comes out in a gust of breath, as if she needs to get it out before she says something else.

"You said that already," I point out, my voice low. She meets my gaze then, and everything around us stills as we watch each other. That otherworldly feeling envelops me. I couldn't shake it even if I tried. Mira has always been fascinating to me, but this? It's different and new and on another level that I don't quite understand.

"I really should—" she begins, when a crash sounds from behind me. I turn and then I'm moving toward the room, rushing in to find the boxes on one side toppled over.

"We're so sorry, Your Highness," one of the men says. "It all came down before we could stack it. We apologize."

"It's not a problem. Please, be careful." I wave him off as I see the shards from a shattered vase on the floor.

"I'll go grab a broom," the man says before taking off. I move closer, helping the other two move the boxes back into their upright position. We step over the shards. As we carry the boxes to the other side of the room and away from the spilled water and broken pieces, I realize Mira is there.

She drops to a crouch, reaching for the big pieces of broken porcelain.

"Don't do that," I call out, coming back to her. She only looks up.

"I'm not touching the small pieces, just these. I don't think we can fix it." She lifts three large porcelain shards. The vase isn't salvageable, but it doesn't matter. It's only a vase. But then Mira's eyes fill with tears, and I'm the one dropping to a crouch in front of her. Her hands shake, and I reach to take the dangerous pieces from her.

"It's okay, I'll clean this up. You don't have to worry yourself." Her speech comes out fast and slightly panicky, much like it did that first day I met her. Something about the broken vase triggered her, and the fierce protectiveness that fills my chest shocks even me.

"Mira, please leave it. It's not your fault. I'll clean it up."

"No, you're the prince. You shouldn't be doing this." She contradicts herself by arguing with me, and when she leans past me, her hand lands on a sharp piece. With a sharp hiss of pain, she jerks her hand back.

I've seen enough. Taking the pieces from her, I gently reach for her elbows, pulling her to a standing position.

"Come with me."

"No, I'm—"

"Stop arguing. You're bleeding. Let me take care of it."

"You don't have to." She holds her hand to her chest, covering it with her other hand to make sure none of the blood seeps through. Looking at this girl, I want to make sure nothing hurts her ever again.

"Please, let me help."

Maybe it's the please that gets her. She nods, and I lead her out and to the closest bathroom.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-FIVE

MIRA

As Luca leads me into the bathroom, I try to keep my emotions at bay, but I can feel myself failing. So much is happening all at the same time, and I can't seem to keep up with any of it.

"Here." He guides me to the sink, and before I can protest, he pulls my hand away from my chest. He cups it in his palm as he takes a look. His fingers feel hot on my already overheated skin. I find it difficult to take a full breath. The bathroom seems to have lost all its breathable air.

"It's not deep, but let's clean it and wrap it up," Luca says. I really am having such a difficult time keeping distance between us. If he doesn't stop being so wonderful, I'm going to lose my heart before I realize what's happening.

Maybe it's too late for that already.

When he takes a small towel from the collection of towels in the basket and moistens it, he brings it to the cut. I hiss as it stings. But then all coherent thought and pain fly out the window as he bends his head over my palm, blowing on it gently. Goosebumps break out all over my skin, sending my head spinning. He lifts only his eyes, looking up at me from under his eyelashes. I'm pretty sure I've gone completely red with heat. My skin tingles as his eyes hold me captive. He sends another gentle burst of air at the cut, still watching me. It's a good thing I'm bracing myself against the counter, because otherwise, I wouldn't be able to stand.

After what seems like an eternity, he straightens and dabs more water on the cut. At the back of my mind, I know it still stings, but I'm too focused on every single one of his movements to notice. The way he runs the cloth over the wound, the way he reaches for gauze and begins to tie it over my palm. The cut is right under my pinky finger, and he wraps the gauze over it and across the space between my pointer and thumb. His movements are slow, precise, and much too intimate for a servant and her prince.

My walls have crumbled down in a heap around us and I am buried under the rubble. I don't know how I can dig myself out of this. When he's done, he doesn't let go and he doesn't take a step back. I realize I have to be the mean one.

"Thank you," I say, finding my voice. "Now, if you'll please excuse me."

"You really can only spend short bursts of time in my presence." He still hasn't moved. I look at him, willing him to let me pass, but he's blocking the doorway. "Tell me what happened back there."

That is not what I expected. I look at him curiously, not understanding the question.

"You started to pick up the broken porcelain shards like it's your duty, and then you had a reaction to it. As if you were scared."

No, he can't notice that. I'm usually much better at keeping those emotions hidden. But that's not true, is it? He has seen me panic three times now.

"It's nothing. I'm just tired."

"Mira, you can talk to me. I can help."

"You can't, okay?" I snap, my voice a little sharper than usual. Luca stands up straighter.

"I can."

"Please stop trying to fix things for me." I can't take this anymore. I need him to understand. I need him to stop being so nice to me. I already feel like I will never recover from him. "I am not your responsibility."

"Aren't all the people of *Zelenovo Korolevstva* my responsibility?" My eyes snap up to his, and I shake my head.

"Don't play Baba Yaga's advocate here," I say, my voice sounding tired even to my own ears. The lack of sleep, this constant fear of being found out, and all the raging emotions I'm feeling for this man are too much.

"What is it about me that puts you on edge?" He's turning the conversation again, and I can't seem to follow. "What is it that you dislike so much?" the prince asks. The genuine curiosity in his voice stops me. We've spent so much time together lately, so much time I never would have expected we'd spend together, but here we are. Once again, we're alone, and he's asking me the important questions.

"It's not that I dislike you," I say. He cocks his head to the side, as if he doesn't really believe me.

"It's not," I reassure him. "It's that I don't think you understand the way the world works. So, we have nothing in common. I'm not trying to be mean. I'm just trying to be honest." He needs to understand just how different we are, how our friendship isn't something that can continue. Not really. Not in any true sense. Especially because I am leaving.

"I get it." He surprises me with those words, and now I'm the one looking at him curiously.

"You do?" I ask.

"I do. I think it's easy to assume somebody is a certain way when they present themselves as such."

"So you mean you're not a carefree prince who loves parties and dancing and entertaining ladies?" I chuckle a little with the question, but there's no humor in my voice. I truly am just so tired. He shakes his head, a seriousness to his eyes.

"No, I think I am all those things, but that's not all I am and not in the way you think. I keep myself at a distance from most people. But not from you."

I'm not sure what to do with him when he's this honest. I'm not sure what to do with the emotions that are raging between us. We've known each other for a short time, but I feel like every time we are together, another layer falls away. The walls that I keep around myself and the layers of indifference he keeps around himself are falling down. No matter how much time he spends with his people, he's never truly open with them. Not like he's been with me.

"You fascinate me," he says. I jerk a little at those words.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you see this world in front of you, and you have these ideas about it, but your heart is still kind and generous. And yet, you don't let anybody walk all over you. How do you do that?"

I'm not sure how I feel about that observation. I'm not used to being seen. But I do reply honestly, because it feels like I owe him and myself that.

"Years of practice."

He studies me again, and a new kind of intensity enters his gaze.

“Years of practice,” he repeats. “That seems like an unpleasant experience.”

“You have no idea.” The words are out before I can stop them. He steps forward, closing some of the distance between us, even though there was barely any to begin with. I can't help but look at him. Something about him draws me in even as I fight against it.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” he asks. I'm shaking my head even before he finishes the question.

“No, I don't. It doesn't matter.”

“You don't think our pasts matter?”

“Well, of course they do. Our pasts are the building blocks of what our lives have been so far, but I don't think they're the building blocks we have to use for the future. They're just the foundation.”

“So you truly believe you don't have to be who you've been.”

“Correct,” I say, and this time I give him a smile. He returns it in that way of his that makes me catch my breath and reevaluate every thought I've ever had about him all at the same time. I don't know what to do with this. I don't know how to feel. I don't know how to survive him.

“Will you come to the dance?” he asks. I nearly stumble back.

“The dance?”

“*Da*, the masquerade ball tomorrow. Will you come?”

“I’m not sure,” I begin carefully. “I mean, I'll be here.” But I'm not sure what he's asking. I don't know if he's asking me to go with him or to see him or if he somehow knows I was the mysterious princess. My mind is spinning out of control thinking of all the possibilities and all the ways I have to keep my identity a secret.

“I just—” he starts. “I think you should come and dance…with me.” He adds that last part almost like he’s telling a secret. I'm mesmerized by him once again, and I can't be. I take a step back, bumping into the counter.

The movement drives my walls back up. His face falls a little bit, settling into that prince mask I've come to know as precisely his.

“I’m not sure I can attend the ball,” I say. He lifts his head at that, and I continue. “I might be around working. Thank you, for—” I raise my bandaged hand.

He watches me for a long moment before he nods. When I move toward him, he steps out of the bathroom and lets me pass. As I leave, I don’t turn around, but I have a feeling he watches me go.

MIRA

IT’S THE END OF THE DAY. I NEED TO HURRY HOME, BUT MY MIND KEEPS GOING IN CIRCLES. HE ASKED me to come to the ball. To dance with him. That must mean something, right? It must.

Of course, it probably means that he’s a nice guy and I’ve misjudged him and I need to stop making up stories in my head. He’s going to marry some beautiful princess one day, for the good of this kingdom. Everything that happened in the last couple weeks will be a memory I hold dear. That’s all. He’ll be a good king. I should’ve told him that. Despite all my prejudice when it came to him, based solely on the nightmare that my family is, which was never fair, he’s going to do well as a ruler. He has his parents’ heart.

A good, kind heart.

So lost am I in my thoughts, I don't even realize I've wandered past the main hall. Glancing around, I see that I'm near the back garden, the one I snuck through a few days ago. The one Luca took me to during the second masquerade ball. My tiny cut tingles, as if reminding me of his kindness today. I move forward before I can think too much of it.

Unable to help myself, I step out of the shadow of the palace and into the garden. I need to go home, but this place, it calms me somehow. It gives me a chance to breathe when no one is looking and there are no responsibilities hanging over my head.

This is the kind of freedom I seek in the human realm. No one watching me. No one telling me what to do. No one punishing me because they're having a bad day. It will be an opportunity to follow my dreams and have a fresh start.

But for some reason, that desire isn't as strong as before.

And then, the reason steps out of the shadows.

"Are you following me now?" Luca asks, a glint of amusement in his eyes. I'm not even surprised he's here. We always seem to find each other.

"*Da*. I simply couldn't help myself." My words and the tone in which it's delivered surprises us both. "I'm s—"

"No, please don't apologize," Luca hurries to say, coming closer with his hand outstretched, as if he can push the word back in. I think he wants to say something else, to tell me why I shouldn't, but he's close enough now that even in the darkening light of the evening, I can see his eyes twinkling with something I don't quite understand.

"I should really get going."

"You're always running away," he says, even before I finish speaking. It's so unusual of him to break manners like this, and I look at him curiously. Something is definitely brewing underneath his calm exterior. Suddenly, I want to peel away all the layers.

Maybe this is foolish, but instead of leaving, I turn toward him. He gives me a small smile, as if satisfied with my decision.

"I'm not running away." I feel the need to clarify. "I simply have a job to do."

"I thought you were done for the day."

"Yes, well, I must go home then."

But still, I don't move, and he doesn't either. Something changed between us at the last dance. Not us, I remind myself. Him and the princess. He connected with her, opened up to her. He doesn't know I'm one and the same.

"Can I tell you something?" Luca seems to have ignored my last statement, instead moving closer and reaching his hand toward me.

"You're going to tell me with your hands?" I ask, glancing down. He seems to realize what he's doing and drops it, looking a little sheepish.

"Let me rephrase that, *lisitchka*, can I show you something?" He's grinning, but I'm frozen to the spot, my mind on that one word. It's a term of endearment, but also a little too close to home. His eyes shift, as if he realizes what he said. I should let it go, but it's been imprinted in my brain.

"Why did you…" I don't even know how to ask the question. He can't know I was the fox at the ball. The magic made sure of it. So, did it stop working at some point?

"*Lisitchka*? Well, you are very good at weaving in and out of the halls of this palace like a sly fox." He's grinning at me now and then I think I can breathe again. He doesn't know. I haven't ruined anything yet. But even as he explains his nickname for me, I can't help but think how often it's used in

an endearing manner. I try not to allow my mind to run away with ideas, but I can't help it.

"My other option was *pchelka*," Luca says, while I'm having an internal freak out. But that does bring me back to the present.

"A bee?"

"A busy bee." He's enjoying this way too much. It's difficult not to let my lips curl up in a smile. But I refuse to give him the victory.

"You need a new hobby. These nicknames are horrible," I say, raising an eyebrow.

"I've got more." Even though he's teasing, there's an undercurrent of something powerful in those words and in the way he looks at me.

My skin grows hot, and I force myself to stay still, so I don't look like I'm fidgeting. Suddenly, I want to fix my hair and dress and make sure there isn't any leftover flour on my face. What is actually happening to me?

"Care to share?" Did my voice just come out a little breathless? *Get a grip on yourself, Miraslava*.

"Not yet."

His voice rumbles low with unspoken promises. I might need to sit down if he keeps looking at me like that. But maybe I'm just imagining it. I need to get a grip, for sure.

"What is it that you want to show me?" I ask. This time, my voice sounds normal. That definitely earns me a piece of cake. Maybe Oksana will oblige. Luca grins, as if he knows what I'm doing, and turns back the way he came.

"Come on," he says. Honestly, I have no choice but to follow him out of the garden.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SIX

LUCA

I stayed busy all day. I helped get the boxes loaded into carriages. I climbed a few trees to rearrange the lights, much to everyone's dismay. They get nervous when I put myself in dangerous situations, apparently. Mama and I spent an hour going over the travel plan she has for herself and Papa after the festivities. Even though the captain of her guard, Devra, and her second-in-command, Ruslan, have been doing the traveling, Mama is ready to see the kingdom for herself again.

But no matter what I've been doing, I keep thinking about Mira. The nagging feeling that I'm missing something hasn't gone away.

I wasn't really planning on seeking her out again. After I gave her the invitation, I was going to leave her alone. I was going to stop obsessing, but I've done the opposite. Once again, Mama noticed, but she didn't push. Instead, she reminded me that all of us have choices, and it's those choices that we take with us through life. So I need to be satisfied with mine. Somehow, Mama always says what I need to hear before I know it myself.

As simple as that, choices. So, I decided my choice is Mira. But even as I decided that, the image of the princess came to mind, and now I can't shake the feeling that the two are connected.

For such a long time, since I was a young teen, I've been afraid to let people in. Sure, I'm nice to them, but it never goes deeper than that. There are no friends coming over to the palace, no people besides my family that I talk to. My parents are my best friends, and I wouldn't change that for anything. But something changed when I met Mira. I wanted her to see me as something other than a prince, and that feeling hasn't gone away. It has only grown stronger. So, of course I went in search of her and found her. We always seem to find each other.

"What is it that you wanted to show me?" she asks, breaking through my thoughts as she trails behind me. I didn't actually have a plan for when I met her. I just wanted to see her. But now my feet carry us toward Mama's study. I realize I want Mira to see the garden we created together.

"Well, if I told you, I would have to kill you," I say, wiggling my eyebrows at her. She rolls her eyes.

"I'm pretty sure every single person in this realm and the next has used that phrase," she says.

"So you don't think it's funny?"

"No, I do not."

She's tired and a little grumpy, and I can't help it, I find it adorable. But I'm going to be honest. At this point, I think I find everything about her adorable.

"Here we are," I say, opening the door for her. "This is my mama's study."

She stares at me in surprise because I'm definitely breaking rules here. No one comes to this wing of the castle because it's ours, my parents and mine. But this is the second time I've led Mira here. The first time we went to my own rooms.

Now Mira stands near the door, almost as if she's terrified to cross the threshold.

"It's okay," I say. "We won't get in trouble."

"Speak for yourself. You're allowed to be here," she says, her tone completely serious.

"I won't let anything happen to you."

My soft voice jerks her eyes to mine. I wonder what she finds there. We stand frozen for a moment in time and then she slowly nods.

When I motion for her to follow me, she does. I lead her to the opposite side of the room, near the window. There is only one large one next to Mama's desk. The rest of the walls are covered in bookshelves in a typical study fashion. But since Mama is the one who taught me my love for plants, her large window has as many plants as she can fit at the table in front of it. If I opened the window, I could reach out to the *berezka* growing there.

Mira's eyes light up as she notices the bowl garden we created together, right at the center of the table. She rushes over without hesitation, studying the tiny shoots coming out of the soil. Mama is letting it grow the normal, non-magical way.

"Oh my, it's going to look so beautiful," Mira says, staring at it as if she's never seen plants grow before. Her eyes are bright as she studies the sprouts. Then she transfers her gaze to the mini garden Mama created.

There are vining plants on each side of the window, growing upward and crossing paths at the top. There are a few bushier plants and a tall succulent that Jemma brought Mama as a gift. Mama has taken a lot of leaves to propagate, setting them up in small glass containers. Mira studies them with a soft smile on her face.

That wonder she carries within her? I've seen it every time she's in the garden and especially any time she's near the ancient tree. She can't help the pure joy she gets from looking at it. I've stopped looking around, almost used to the beauty. Her enjoyment of it is what makes me pay attention again.

"I thought you would want to see how they're doing, considering you played a major part in their arrangement."

She glances up at me then. "Thank you for showing me. It's going to be beautiful."

Her messy braid falls over her shoulder, and I have the sudden urge to reach out and move it back. She stands slowly, her eyes still on me. I want to tell her she's beautiful. I want her to know that I see her. She turns toward me slowly, almost expectantly, and my vision blurs again. It's like I'm seeing her shift between the princess and Mira.

I can't tell if it's a trick that my mind is playing because I want so badly for it to be true. Because I do. I'm done fighting against it. This girl is something special, and I want to discover exactly who she is under the layers she hides beneath. Like recognizes like. I can see myself in her in a way that isn't truly me, but someone who fills the other parts of me.

I'm getting ahead of myself, and it's poetic enough that I would scare her away if I said all this out loud. But I have my suspicions, and I need to know if they're true.

"So, have you decided?" I find myself asking. Clearly, I can't help myself. She furrows her brows briefly, and I clarify. "Decided if you're coming to the dance tomorrow."

"Oh, um, I'm not sure yet. We haven't talked about our assignments."

"Right, because you'll be working. So maybe I'll see you anyway."

"Well, servants aren't really meant to be seen, are they?" Her eyes are back on the plants, a

wistful sort of look about her.

I'm not sure if I'm meant to hear her words, but I do. They carry a lot of weight in them. Before I can stop myself, I take a step closer. She's glancing up at me again.

"I see you," I say in barely a whisper. Her breath catches. Her eyes latch onto mine, and I want to close the distance between us once and for all.

A sudden clap of thunder makes her jump, bringing us back to our senses. She takes a step back, moving toward the door before I know what's happening.

"I have to go. Good night, Your Royal Highness."

And just like that, she slips through the door and is gone. I think I'm about to have another nearly sleepless night.

MIRA

When I race out into the night, the rain is only beginning to fall. I give a wide berth to the inn Feodora and the girls are staying at, just in case. Not that they would be caught out in the rain, even if it's only a drizzle. But I'm not taking any chances. I'm so close to reaching my goals. After the dance tomorrow, everything will change. I can feel that in every part of me. I cannot allow my feelings to deter me from my plans.

Even with the rain, the partygoers aren't discouraged. Laughter surrounds me as I make my way past vendors and toward the road that'll lead me out of town. This whole kingdom would be such a different place if the wrong queen sat on the throne. Queen Calista has proved that by her reign, and when the time comes, Luca will choose a queen who'll continue what Queen Calista started. I feel like berating myself any time I entertain a thought of Luca as anyone other than the prince. Thinking of him as the guy who danced with me is bad enough. But remembering how his hand felt holding mine, how his breath cooled the stinging of my cut, those are the memories I have to push out of my mind or else I'll crumble under the weight of them.

Allowing myself the time and space to feel before I put it all away is how I've dealt with life since my mama's death. It's always better to give yourself the time to feel, instead of simply ignoring your own emotions. In recent years, it's not a rule I've lived by. I suppressed every part of myself, trying to make myself small enough to stay safe. Yet, now I'm learning that I need to let myself feel again. But only allow small increments of time for feelings or I will be swallowed whole.

Feodora has made sure I have no safe space in my own house, and the knowledge that I am so close to being done with her forever fills me with renewed determination.

But a small part of me, the part that allowed itself to get attached to Luca's insistent presence wherever I am in the castle, can't help but wonder what life would be like if I stayed. If I were the mysterious princess and actually had a chance with the prince. My parents would've loved him, of that I have no doubt. That makes it all the more difficult to walk away, even though I know that's what's best for both of us. He'll find someone worthy of him and of this kingdom. And I'll find my place in the world, even if it's not in this realm.

Darkness has fallen over the forest, but tonight *Volshebnii Les* isn't sleeping. The rain doesn't get any heavier, but the space around me does, somehow. I can hear movement in the trees. My hand

reaches for my knife, just to have something solid to hold onto, and I pick up my pace.

What used to be a place of refuge is quickly becoming a concern. Between the strange horsemen, the voices I hear calling out, and the constant movement between the trees, something is stirring.

Now that I believe in magic again, I'd be foolish to think this isn't something of the sort. It almost feels magical.

When a song starts, I don't realize what I'm hearing at first. I can't make out the words, only the sad melody. It fills me with so much sorrow that I want to go to it. I don't think—my feet just turn in that direction, toward the darkness of the forest. But then, before I can take a step forward, my chest grows warm for just a moment. It's just enough to jolt me out of the trance. I blink my eyes, trying to focus and then start walking again. Away from the song and its pull.

My eyes continue to scan my surroundings. That's when a movement catches my attention. It's not in the depths of the forest, but upward, in the trees. It's there and then gone, much like the horsemen. I stand there for a moment, watching and waiting, and then it comes again.

I gasp as my eyes meet that of a bird and a woman all at once. Her face is human with dark, bottomless eyes that stare back at me. But her body is that of a bird. Her wings open and then she takes flight, disappearing into the night sky.

An omen. A sign. This is something I've read about in books but never seen for myself. The forest is brimming to the top with magical creatures, and it's way past time for me to get out. I have no idea what the song or the woman wanted of me, but it solidifies the decision I've made. I will leave Skazka and her magic behind. Whatever is brewing within this land, it is not my place any longer.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-SEVEN

LUCA

As predicted, I barely slept. I can't shake the feeling that something big is happening. It's like a storm is brewing on the horizon. The thing is, I don't quite know if it's just my emotions anymore. Something feels…off.

The rain hasn't let up, which will cause some concerns for the celebration tonight. Then again, it's never stopped people from partying before, and it's not about to do so now. But the air feels charged with upcoming turbulence. I can almost reach out and touch it, as if it's a physical object. I'm not sure how to feel about that, which is why I seek out my parents first thing.

I find them in the training yard, swords drawn as they move together in a fluid rhythm. Ever since I was a kid, I've been fascinated by their dynamic. Mama is the stronger, ruthless one. Sometimes she gets so intense, she scares away everyone but Papa. He, on the other hand, is kindness and strength, with a more calm and precise manner. But as they spar, neither one is holding back.

Their dance is practiced. They know how to anticipate each other's movements. Still, there's concentration on both their faces as they take the exercise seriously. Mama swings to the right, and Papa blocks it. She pushes him back as she advances, going left, right, left. He stops every blow. But then she spins, ducking as his sword comes up, before their weapons crash, as they disarm each other. Then she sweeps her leg out. He jumps to the side, but Mama isn't done. She pushes off her hands, like a handstand, sending her legs back at Papa, kicking him back. He stumbles but catches himself just in time. Immediately, she jumps up, wrapping her whole body around him. They tumble to the floor, rolling over each other, and then they laugh.

Suddenly, I feel like I'm intruding. I take a step back, ready to give them space, when Mama calls out.

"Don't you dare leave, Luca," she says as she bends over Papa. She gives him a quick kiss. Then, they're off the ground and turning toward me.

"How long did you know I was here?" I ask, stepping farther in.

"Since the moment you stepped past the pillars," Papa replies, picking up their swords from the ground and placing them both back on their respective racks. My parents look sweaty, as if they've been out here a while.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I say. I never want to take their alone time away from them. With all the responsibilities constantly hanging on their shoulders, I know they need this time to spend together. But they just smile at me, beckoning me forward. Mama takes a seat on the bench as Papa walks over to grab their water containers.

"We always have time for you. What's on your mind?"

Of course Mama can tell something is bothering me. Not only because of our recent conversations, but because she just always knows. I want to ask her about Mira, and I want to ask her about the magic brewing in the air. My chest feels heavy with indecision.

"Do you feel it?" I pick the safer subject out of the two. I don't have to explain myself. Mama can tell immediately what I'm talking about.

"It's been getting stronger," she says, accepting her water from Papa with thanks. "The forest seems restless, but I still can't find the cause of it. It's like there's a blind spot."

"Is that why you're making plans to travel again?"

"Partially," Papa says. "Your mother has also grown restless."

"It's not my fault I have the traveler's bug in me."

They share that look again, like they're saying a million words without uttering a single one. The traveling together, mostly incognito, is something they do for themselves. My heart pangs a little at the thought of having something this precious with someone.

No, not someone. Mira.

Logically, I try to put all the pros and cons into a list, but I can't get past the part where she just fits. In the most basic of ways. And that terrifies me.

Mama watches me now, as if waiting for me to say the next part. When I finally do, the words rush out of me.

"I'm nervous. And maybe scared. I think—I think I care about someone. I haven't allowed a new person in for so long, I wasn't sure I was capable. But now I'm here, and I'm scared. You taught me to be brave with my feelings, and yet, right now, I can't seem to find the courage." I admit it all, and maybe for the first time, I realize how truly terrifying it is to let someone see all the parts of you and still want you anyway.

"I wasn't always brave."

"What?"

My mama's words stop the panic inside me for a moment.

"I wasn't always brave," she repeats, reaching for my hand and taking it in hers. "You know Papa and I had many obstacles to being together. Even though we grew up together and trained side by side, I was destined to marry for the good of my family. I was betrothed to someone else for a time. But when the war came, and I was tasked with my mission, your father came after me. He saved me."

"And then you saved me right back." Papa steps up to her, a look of love so fierce in his eyes it nearly takes all the air out of the yard. They've always been like this, even when they argue or push each other's buttons. They always come back together to this place of love.

"What we're trying to say, Luca," Mama turns back to me, "is that you find the people you can be brave for."

It's like I don't even have to explain it to her. She knows exactly what I'm asking, what I'm searching for. Before I can voice my suspicions to them, I have to find out if I'm right. Tonight, if the mysterious princess shows up, I will find out once and for all if she and Mira are the same person. And then, hopefully I can be brave.

MIRA

"You've been on edge all day, are you okay?" Oksana asks as I pull another batch of cookies from the oven. I've stayed in the kitchen most of the day. I barely slept last night, and with the deadline of Feodora and the girls returning to the house, I was up before the sun, trying to finish off the chores.

The last ball is tonight and it's the grandest of affairs. A few more royals have arrived for the festivities, and there are supposed to be fireworks at the end. But all I can think about is Luca's invitation. I've barely thought of anything else, even looming so close to the finish line for my goals. I haven't told Oksana. I'm a little scared of what she'll say.

"Okay, that's it. Let's go."

Suddenly, my friend pulls me out of the kitchen and toward the front entrance. Her grip on my wrist is strong, and I have no choice but to follow. When we step outside onto the bridge, she finally lets go.

"Wow, all the dough kneading has made you strong," I comment, rubbing my wrist.

"Don't try to throw compliments at me," she replies, placing her hands on her hips. "Spill whatever secrets you've got, because you've been acting weird."

"Not weird," I say. "Just distracted."

Oksana doesn't budge, raising her eyebrows at me. A few people walk by carrying various items. We can't have this conversation here. This time, I grab her by the wrist and lead her toward the vendors, not quite reaching them. There's a bit of space between where they're set up and the bridge, so I steer us to the right, away from the main pathway. There are bushes and a few trees here, a version of the gardens on the inside but on a smaller scale. It's enough to give us some cover, though.

"Luca asked me to the dance," I say, not standing on ceremony. "Not technically, but kind of."

Oksana opens her mouth, as if she's getting ready to squeal. I slap my hand over it, keeping her quiet.

"Please, don't make a scene."

Her eyes are big above my palm, but she nods. I narrow my eyes for a moment, but she seems to have gotten a hold of herself, so I take a step back.

"Mira, this is huge!" she says in a mock whisper. I roll my eyes. Her enthusiasm doesn't help me curb my worries. "It's not huge?" she asks.

"It is. But also, I don't know. He clearly likes the mysterious princess. Everyone has been talking about it. But we've spent a lot of time together, and maybe he likes me too. Or, I don't know. It's confusing because I'm two people. But he asked me, Mira, to come dance with him, and I'm freaking out, okay? I don't know what to do. Or think. Or feel. Or—why are you looking at me like that?"

Oksana hasn't moved, her eyes following me as I pace and rant. She's looking rather happy for such a crazy moment.

"You've got it bad," she says. I bristle.

"I do not."

"You do. I've seen it happening slowly, and now, it's a whole tumble down a hill." She gives me her lovey-dovey eyes and then she grins.

"Stop that."

"Stop what? I'm happy for you!"

"Why? This is not a happy moment. This will never work. I have to tell him the truth. No, I have to tell him goodbye."

"What? No!"

"Yes." I turn to my friend. "Don't you see? I don't have a choice. I have to give him up. This will never work. I'm a nobody, and he's the next king of *Zelenovo Korolevstva*. We're completely incompatible, if he even does like me like that. I think he was just being nice, but my brain is blowing it out of proportion, and I have to put an end to it."

"Oh, sweetheart, I don't think your brain is the one doing anything here."

I glare at her for all I'm worth, and it doesn't faze her.

"Seriously, you need to go to the dance, and you need to tell him the truth. I'm all for that plan."

"No."

"Yes."

"We're not doing this again."

"Sure we are. This is how I win arguments with you."

I shake my head, but she's right. I do need to go to the dance. But not for some magical hope that he picks me over all the noble and royal romantic prospects. This has to be the end. It's the only way I can come out of this unscathed. Although, if I'm being honest with myself, it's too late for that for me. I'm scathed for an eternity.

"Does Lubov have something I can wear?"

When Oksana doesn't answer right away, I give her a look.

"Lubov has been tweaking your dress."

"Why would she do that?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"I might've told her to do it," Oksana replies, shrugging. "Anyway, good thing I think ahead. It'll be ready by tonight."

"Even though I told you I'm not doing this again?"

She gives me another one of her Oksana looks. "Mira, we both knew you'd have to see him again."

I shake my head but don't comment further. My whole body is shaking with anticipation. She's right, of course. It all has to end at the last ball. Even though I've resigned myself to walking away, I can't leave him hanging. Not really. He will expect the princess, just like every other night, but now, he's also expecting Mira.

Well, maybe not expecting, but he'll be looking for us both. My heart thuds against my chest, making sure I'm paying attention to it. I place my hand there. My fingers find the necklace, and not for the first time, I wish my parents were here to help me through this. My hand squeezes the pendant before I drop my hand to my side. I may not have my mama here, but I have a best friend who's been looking out for me for years. When I tell Luca the truth, I'll need to make sure she doesn't get in trouble.

And then, I'll walk away, saying goodbye to everything I never thought I'd wish for. The time has come for me to move forward with my life. That means walking away from Luca.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-EIGHT

MIRA

There have been no run-ins with the prince today, and for that I am grateful. Truth be told, it would've been difficult for him to run into me, considering I've stayed in the kitchens all day. I baked and prepped and helped out with cooking when one of the girls had to step out. Anything to keep myself away from him.

Seeing him at the ball will be hard enough.

My outfit tonight will be similar to that of the first night. I'll wear the same mask with my hair curled and the purple extensions in. But when Lubov wheels in the dress, I gasp. She added another, darker layer of blue to the top of it, the color of the sky on a clear day. The shimmer of the glittering tulle and the layers of purple and silver and white make the dress look magical. It has movement even when I'm not wearing it.

"Lubov, you have outdone yourself. I have no idea how I will ever repay you for this," I say, reaching out to run my fingers carefully over the material. The young girl looks so proud of herself, a huge grin on her face.

"You can send me some of those human fashion magazines. I'd love to learn more about their designs."

"Deal."

The girl scurries off to grab something, but I continue staring at the dress, tears pooling in my eyes.

"You don't have to make it a goodbye." Oksana's voice comes from beside me, and I turn to glance at her. Her face is full of understanding and sympathy, and it makes me want to cry more.

"I do. You know I do. He might forgive me for lying to him, but what will we do? Lie to the entire kingdom about where I come from? They'll never accept me, which means Luca and I have no future."

Oksana doesn't say anything right away, as if she's mulling over the words.

"You really think that? Truly?"

I don't want to tell her about the conversation I overheard. She doesn't need to know what other people are thinking, lest it change her view of them. And what of my stepfamily? Would they receive notoriety because of me if I started dating the prince? Even for a little while? I couldn't give them that kind of power over anyone. I couldn't protect myself all these years, but I will protect Luca and the kingdom.

"It's what's for the best, for all parties," I say, resigned. I think Oksana might leave it alone, but she's not done with me yet.

"But is it what you want?"

"What?" I turn to her, and she continues to study me, almost like she's waiting for me to come to some kind of realization. If I were to be honest with myself, I would say that no, it's not what I want. For the first time since I was a child and believed in the kind of love that transcends all magic and reason, I want it. I want Luca to want me, for me to be enough. Just as I am. A girl with no family, no magic, and no noble status. My papa was a businessman, a respected man, but not of noble blood. But it's foolish for me to want those things. That's not how the world works. Good things don't just happen to people because they're good people. Work and perseverance are a necessity to make dreams come true. And this isn't something I can work for.

"I can see you talking yourself out of it," Oksana comments, her voice a little sad. I glance at her just in time to see her sigh. "You don't think you deserve good things, so you don't wish for them."

"Oksana—"

"Am I wrong?"

"*Nyet*, you're not wrong," I snap, because she's calling me out on things I don't want to be thinking about right now. All I've done for the majority of my life is fight to survive. That's been my only goal. How do I stop trying to survive and simply live? That's exactly what I'd be wishing for if I allowed myself to wish for Luca.

"Oh, my friend." Oksana steps up, reaching for me as I fall into her embrace. She's been my best friend and my sister in ways Agrippina and Galina could never be. She knows me maybe even better than I know myself. "You have so much love in that heart of yours. You share it with people who don't even deserve it. Yet, you're scared to share it with someone who will fight to earn it?"

"What if you're wrong?" I ask, my voice muffled by Oksana's shoulder. "What if he's infatuated by the idea of me but not the real thing?"

Isn't that a fear everyone has, not being good enough to love, to fight for. Before this celebration, I had a very precise view of the monarchy. I knew they were there, and they had the power to help me, but beyond getting passage to the human realm, I never wanted anything else.

Now, I want all kinds of things.

"Miraslava." Oksana pushes me back up, her hands on my shoulders so she can look me in the eye. "Being terrified of love is the most normal aspect of life. Do you know why I change the subject any time you bring up Yura?"

I shake my head.

"Because a part of me is nervous he's going to change his mind. I'm afraid he'll wake up one day—after the celebration is over and he doesn't see me daily—and he'll think to himself, '*hmm*, maybe it was only the thrill of the magic in the air and Oksana isn't all that special.'"

"Oksana! He would never think something like that!" I'm enraged even by the thought of it. "You have the sweetest heart of anyone I know. Your work ethic is incredible. You take care of your whole family and me! You're beautiful and smart and—why are you laughing?"

"Because you just proved my point," she says, raising her eyebrows at me. "We are our own worst judges, picking ourselves apart in the most ridiculous of ways. But the people who love us, they see us as we truly are and still find us beautiful."

She tugs me closer. I hug her with all the love I can because she truly is a gift. But it doesn't change the fact that Luca is not in love, therefore, it would be best for us to part ways. Regardless of how I feel.

"Does that mean I can tease you about Yura now?" I ask as she pulls me to my feet so I can finish getting ready.

"Absolutely not. We're too new at this. We've only been on one proper date. You can give me a hard time about it when I'm sure of his intentions."

"He would be a fool not to declare himself."

"That's the truth." Oksana grins. "Now, let's get you into this dress."

LUCA

THE PARTY IS IN FULL SWING WITH MORE PEOPLE IN ONE PLACE THAN I'VE EVER SEEN BEFORE. THE courtyard looks just as magical as ever. I think Skazka herself added a bit of a glow to her trees to help with the ambiance. Many of those who couldn't travel during the week have come for the weekend. That's why the last ball is always the biggest.

People have been arriving all day, and I've been playing host. I was born into this, so it doesn't faze me as much as when I was a kid and only wanted to play with other kids. I've stepped into my role, but that means I haven't seen Mira all day. I have no idea if she's coming, and the not knowing is driving me a little crazy. I've been scanning the crowd, keeping a half smile plastered to my face as I lean against one of the walls. Mostly, I'm antsy.

"Are you trying to rebrand yourself into a broody prince?" a voice asks.

I turn my head to see Ekaterina coming by. She's wearing a nearly skin-tight dress, completely different from everyone else here, and she has no mask.

"You're keeping up your brand of a rebel quite well. Any tips on branding?"

She grins, flipping her hair over one shoulder. "Yes. Don't try so hard."

"I'm not doing it on purpose," I mumble.

"Your mysterious princess, right?" I glance at her sharply, and her bright red lips curl up in a smirk. "Everyone has noticed, Luca. People like to talk."

"I wish they would leave me out of their gossip."

"Oh come on, Prince. Being talked about is the best way to keep your secrets. You just feed the right people the right kind of information..." She trails off, and I don't miss the wicked gleam in her eyes. She's definitely the only young woman I connected to on all my dates the past two weeks. I think we could be friends. We're on our way there already, both of us on the same page about where we stand. She has no interest in me, or anyone at all as far as I know. But I like talking to her, and she seems to like it too. I'm newer to this friendship thing, but I'm trying.

"How much of that advice have you taken lately?"

"That's for me to know, Prince. But I will tell you one thing I've heard. More and more people are nervous about traveling through *Volshebnii Les*. There's been talk about the forest coming alive again. I'm not sure what's that about, but something is brewing."

This time, I give her my full attention, tearing my gaze away from the crowd. Even though she keeps a smile on her lips, her eyes are serious. I file away the information to share with Mama. The disturbances Ekaterina's been picking up must have something to do with whatever is going on in the forest.

"My parents and I will be leaving tomorrow. If I hear anything else, I'll be sure to let you know. I'm sorry I wasn't much help."

I reach out, taking her hand in mine and give it a quick squeeze, a formal handshake feeling like a new beginning all of a sudden. Maybe I couldn't help my parents find out more information about the magical dealings of the land, but I think I may have created an alliance. She moves on without another word, and I lean back against the wall.

A commotion catches my attention, and when I look over to the entrance, my lips curl into an automatic smile. Pushing away from the wall, I head toward my parents and the newly-arrived couple.

"Luca, there you are," Mama says as Papa grins.

"Thank you for leaving your post of holding up the wall. I'm not sure how it'll survive without you." I shake my head at Papa's humor and turn to our guests.

"King Gavriil, Lady Nikita," I say, inclining my head. King Gavriil extends his hand. I shake it firmly, genuinely happy to see them. Then I step over and give Nikita a kiss on the cheek. Even though they've only visited the kingdom once before, we've kept in touch since then. Lady Nikita is from the human realm and is a fascinating person to talk to. King Gavriil is a newly reinstated monarch, so Mama has been giving him tips.

"Aren't you supposed to be married by now?" I arch a brow as Lady Nikita rolls her eyes.

"Well, according to Gavriil's sister, it has to be a grand affair, and we've been a little preoccupied with other things. Or she's been a little preoccupied with planning the whole thing, since apparently, I'm not allowed to do anything." King Gavriil's hand snakes out around his fiancé, bringing her flush against him. She leans her head back to look at him.

"*Moya krasavitsya* deserves nothing but the best, and she will get it," he says, looking down at her with such love that I feel like I'm intruding.

"Or he'll get in trouble with his sister, is what he's trying to say," Lady Nikita replies with a grin. "Either way, you'll be there, right?" She directs that question at the three of us, and Mama grins.

"We wouldn't miss it. Now, I have very important questions to ask you."

"Are they about the new action movie we were talking about last time?" Lady Nikita's eyes light up as she leans closer to Mama.

"*Da*!"

And just like that, Lady Nikita pulls away from her fiancé and she's off with Mama to find Jemma. Mama loves having someone to talk to who loves the human realm as much as she does. Even though I've only been there a handful of times, I always feel like I've grown up a child of both worlds. That's something I don't ever want to take for granted.

"They really are so amusing when it comes to the human realm," King Gavriil says, watching them weave through the crowd. Lady Nikita was born and raised there. Their story is an interesting one, just like my parents' story. They had to overcome a curse and their own misgivings about each other before they could be together. My eyes stray to the crowd almost automatically, searching for a familiar face.

"Are you still keeping the trade open?" Papa asks, and I turn back to the conversation.

"It's regulated as much as it can be, but people will always find a way to do whatever it takes for money."

They must be talking about the portals to the human realm in King Gavriil's kingdom. As far as I know from studying the kingdoms, his has the most portals, with *Korolevstvo Tsvetov*, Ekaterina's home, a close second. There haven't been any new ones created in generations, but people always seem to find them. If they want them bad enough.

That's why it's been so difficult to locate Baba Yaga. She has a way of finding portals without

even looking, giving her the perfect escape routes. Mama was sure she was gone from our realm for years because of the portals. I'm sure it's something I'll have to deal with when it's my turn to be king.

My mind is in that half-panic mode about my responsibilities, when I feel her. My attention goes to the crowd immediately. I twist around until finally…finally the crowd parts, and I see her.

CHAPTER

TWENTY-NINE

MIRA

This is getting too confusing, too warped. I cannot allow myself to fall any deeper into the lie, the one that makes me believe someone like Luca might actually want to be with me. When he opened up to me at the last dance, I saw it for what it was. A prince connecting with a princess. That's not who I am, and it's past time for me to stop pretending. This is the last ball of the celebration, and it will be the goodbye we both need. It has to be.

This is the mantra I've been repeating in my head since I got ready and made my way here. This is a goodbye, nothing else.

So, when I step into the ballroom, I make sure to not look for him, even though he's the first thing I want. I need to give myself time to get oriented. I need to see him gradually, in a way that's controlled. So instead of looking for him, I make my way through the throngs of people, smiling greetings and pretending I belong one last time.

When I finally allow myself a moment to look for him, I find him right away. His eyes are on me as he stands with his father and a man I don't recognize. I think he's going to come over, but he doesn't. It's as if he too is acting a part, and this one is all nonchalance on his end.

Fine, I can be just as nonchalant. Maybe he's proving a point, or maybe I am. To myself and to him. When the music begins for the next dance, a man steps up, introduces himself, and asks me for a spin. I readily agree.

This is good, this is perfect. I can use this to remind myself that Luca isn't the last man in Skazka.

Yet when the man, whose name I've already forgotten, places his hand on my waist, I feel nothing. One of my hands lands on his shoulder while the other is in his outstretched hand. Together, we begin to move to the music. I keep expecting something to happen, to feel anything at all. If what I feel for Luca is simply attraction, then why can't I feel the same for this man? My eyes roam over him carefully. He has dark hair, a strong jawline, and dark brown eyes. He's poised, clearly a noble. He even seems nice. But even as he speaks, talking about the beautiful decorations around us, I can't concentrate.

Then, as we make another turn, Luca is there.

"Mind if I step in?" he asks. The man immediately drops my hand.

"Of course not, Your Highness." The man bows to me, glancing between the two of us, and then he moves away and I'm left with Luca.

"That was rude," I say as the prince steps up.

"So was dancing with another man."

I've never heard his voice sound like this before, and I glanced at him in surprise. It's almost like I'm seeing glimpses of a storm brewing before it hits. Luca's hand wraps around my waist, tugging me against him with much less distance than is appropriate. I barely swallow a gasp and then his hand is holding mine, and we're moving once more.

"You didn't seem all that concerned at first. Why can't I dance with someone else?"

His eyes narrow, and I can't figure out his attitude. There's more to it than meets the eye, but I don't know what since this is a new version of him.

"Would it make you feel better—" he begins, his voice barely above a whisper, "—if I told you I hated seeing you dance with someone else? Even briefly."

"*Da*." My voice is even softer than his. Then, his eyes are filled with fire.

"Then feel better."

I can't help the sensations that race over my body at those quiet, yet powerful words. He has so much restrained emotion, but it's only barely restrained. I think if I had stepped any closer to that man, Luca would've ripped me away from him. I have no idea what to do with that information, so instead of thinking, I let Luca spin me in a dance.

His eyes haven't left my face. There's a new kind of emotion in them, one I haven't seen before. But there's also curiosity, as if he's getting ready to ask me a million questions. His hand tightens on my waist as we turn again, and I gasp at the heat spreading through my body. We're too close, yet we're not close enough. Every speech I had prepared for him on the way here has left me entirely, and I'm simply speechless as I let him lead me around the dance floor.

Maybe that's for the best. When the music stops, I'll tell him my final goodbye. But for now, I allow myself this small gift. I focus on the way his body feels pressed against mine, the way his hand holds me secure to his chest. How strong and sure he feels next to me, as if he could take on all the worries of the world right alongside me. I give myself this moment to simply enjoy him for who he is.

LUCA

THE MOMENT MY EYES LANDED ON HER, I COULD SEE IT CLEARLY. PAST THE MAGIC AND THE DISGUISE.

It's Mira. My Mira.

I wanted to go to her immediately, but something kept me rooted in place. Then her eyes found mine, and she didn't move toward me. Even at a distance, behind her mask, I could tell there was a wall between us. And then she started dancing with someone else.

The way my body went rigid, hands curling at my sides at the mere sight of her with someone else, surprised me. The fact that she chose this stranger over me. My mind completely shut down as I stalked over to them, stopping them mid-spin. I probably looked crazy, and I don't care. I think that's the first time I've truly felt jealous. I didn't like it one bit.

Is this the possessive streak Papa said I have, something I got from him? Maybe. But it's definitely something I need to dissect later, when I can give it the proper attention.

Because right now, all my attention is on the beautiful young woman in my arms.

Just like the other times, we dance in sync, like we've been doing it our whole lives. But I don't want to keep her at arm's length, so I pull her closer. She gasps, the sound going straight to my core.

Before I say the words, I want to show her. With this dance, I want to show her just how extraordinary she is. I spin her, and she twirls outward as my arm extends before I pull her toward me again. Instead of simply keeping her in front of me, I sweep an arm against her back. It's like she anticipates my move. She keeps her palm on my left shoulder as I put my arm behind her. She pulls herself up, her feet leaving the floor, and over my back by steadying herself with the arm around my neck. Her dress flows out around us. When she lands on my other side, I'm pulling her against me once more. Our bodies move side to side and then we're twirling again. She spins out, and this time when I pull her in, I grab her around the waist. She keeps herself steady, and I spin us both, her feet off the ground. The move brings us eye to eye, her side flush against mine as we float around the dance floor.

The sensations racing though my body are unlike anything I've ever felt before. It's as if my whole life I've been waiting for this one moment, and it has finally arrived. Her eyes stay glued to mine, and I can't believe I couldn't see it before. They're the same blue I've come to appreciate, especially with all the glaring she's done at me. This princess was always Mira. The only way I wouldn't be able to see it is by magic. But that's another question to file away for later.

Right now, all I want to do is create this magic on the dance floor. With her.

When I finally set her down, the music stops, and we're both breathing heavily. We barely spoke the whole dance, but it feels like we talked with our bodies. She hasn't moved away, one hand still on my shoulder, the other clasped in my own. I can feel her heartbeat against my chest. My heart matches hers beat by beat.

"Come with me," I whisper as she raises her eyes to mine. There's barely a nod there, but she allows me to take her hand as I step back. When I pull her away from the dance floor, a woman steps in front of us.

"*Dobroye noche*, Your Highness," she says. Her voice sounds like a sneer. "You know, it isn't very nice to hog the prince all to yourself." She addresses Mira directly now.

"It wasn't my intent," Mira replies, keeping her face averted. I hold her hand a little tighter as I step around the woman and her daughters. I remember them from the first dance. Their crazy colorful outfits are hard to forget.

"I'll be back for another dance later. If you'll excuse me."

Then I lead Mira out of the courtyard and across the way. I want to take her back to my garden—my personal one, because it feels like we should have the conversation where I first realized I was falling for her. But then, I think I was falling even before then.

"Where are we going?" Mira asks. I throw her a grin.

"I want to show you a secret."

She knows about it of course, but it doesn't matter. I want to see her smile. I want her to study the trees and the herbs like she did that first time. And I want to tell her everything. Every secret I hold within myself. Because opening up like that, truly sharing the parts of me that I've kept locked away, that's the only way I know to show her just how important she is to me.

CHAPTER

THIRTY

MIRA

He leads me out of the courtyard and toward the side of the castle that I'm quickly becoming more familiar with. I can't exactly tell him I know where we're going, but a part of me is saddened he would take a near stranger there. Although, when he took me here the first time, I was a stranger too.

"I promise to behave," he says, pushing the door to his room open wide.

"Promises, promises." I chuckle, but I step inside anyway, even as my heart feels like it's going to beat out of my chest. Luca doesn't hesitate to walk across the room and toward his personal garden. I follow a little slower behind.

Just like last time, I'm in awe at the beauty of the space. Luca has cleaned it up a bit since I was here last, pruning some of the garden plants and decorative bushes.

"It's beautiful," I say, because that's expected of me. I walk over to his herb table, looking over the pots he has labeled.

"So are you." His voice is soft, and he's keeping his distance, but it still fills every pore in my body with a pleasant tingle.

"*Spasibo*."

"*Pozalysta*."

I take a deep breath, looking for the words I need in order to tell him the truth. But he beats me to it.

"Can I tell you something? You said last time that you would keep my secrets."

That's right, I did. I wonder how he'd feel about sharing them with a commoner. I nod anyway.

"I don't have any magic," he says, almost matter of fact. I glance at him in surprise. I didn't think he wanted anyone to know. "I also don't have any friends." That's definitely not what I thought he'd say.

"Those are two very strong statements, Your Highness."

"They are. And they go hand in hand." He comes farther into the garden, walking over to one of the bushes to run his hand through it. "When I was young, I thought I was going to have a lot of magic. My mother is one of the most powerful magic wielders in history, so why wouldn't I? But I never manifested."

He stops talking, and I cock my head to the side, pushing my hair behind my shoulder.

"How does that end with you not having friends?"

"I had a best friend once," he replies, turning to face me once more. "Ruslan's brother." I must've

made a face because he clarifies. “Ruslan is Mama’s third-in-command, after Devra. He travels with the captain of the guard on missions. That’s where he is now. It’s always easier when he travels because then I don’t have a constant visual reminder of how I killed his brother, my best friend.”

His eyes are on mine. There is so much pain there it nearly takes my breath away. I want to go to him. I want to offer him words of comfort, but I can tell that he’s trying to figure out how to give me the whole story, so I wait him out. He rubs his hands at his temples, shutting his eyes briefly.

“Roma and I were the same age. Ten. He thought I could do anything. My magic should’ve manifested by then, but it hadn’t. Roma thought if we forced it to, it would. So, he climbed a tree and told me to catch him with my magic.

“We were always doing dumb things, but this was the first time he put it on me in that way. I told him I couldn’t, and he said I could. We argued, the way children do, and then I told him, clearly, he didn’t trust in my powers that much because he wasn’t even at the top of the tree.”

I know where this is going, and yet, I couldn’t stop Luca from telling it if I tried. The words are pouring out of him now, as if he’s been holding them back for years. He probably has.

“Roma climbed higher. And then before I could do or say anything, he slipped.” I curl my hand into my dress, letting him get this out. “I remember the screaming. His and mine. I wasn’t ready, but then I tried, I tried so hard to save him, and I couldn’t do anything. I couldn’t—” He stops again, taking in full breaths of air, as if he has to work at it to make sure his lungs obey.

“I want to be able to access my magic, but it’s been dormant my whole life. And because of that, I couldn’t save him. It was my fault we were there in the first place and then I couldn’t even fix it. I—”

It’s as if his words opened the floodgates. His body shudders with the intensity of it. He grabs his head, clearly in pain, as he drops to his knees. Disregarding my dress or my resolve to keep my distance, I drop down as well, reaching for him. Placing the palms of my hands on his cheeks, I cradle his face as I raise it. His eyes are filled with grief and guilt, and it nearly breaks me in two.

“Luca, focus on me. I’m right here.”

There are tears in his eyes when he meets mine, and one of my thumbs wipes one away as it tries to escape down his cheek. I’ve never touched him like this before. His skin feels hot under my fingertips. He stares at me, in awe or in confusion I can’t really tell because my own eyes are glistening.

“How can I lead my people if I can’t even save one person?” he whispers, not taking his eyes off me. There’s so much responsibility, so much weight on his shoulders, but it’s weight he seems to have placed there himself. Our conversation from yesterday rises up in my mind, and even more now, I want him to hear what I have to say. So, I don’t move away. I don’t let go. I force him to keep his attention on me.

“I’m sorry you couldn’t save your friend, but it wasn’t your fault. He put himself in that position, and he paid the ultimate price. A king knows how to use what’s in front of him as building blocks for a better tomorrow. You can use the lessons you learned, the guilt you carry, and change it into something good for your people.”

He stares at me as if he’s never seen me before. One of his hands reaches out to me, running over a lock of my hair. Then he winds it slowly around his finger. I don’t even know if he realizes what he's doing, but the slight tug sends pleasant goosebumps over my body.

“Our past doesn’t define us, huh?” He nearly whispers, echoing my words from before. But I’m not done. I need him to hear me. I place my face right in front of his, my hands still on either side of his face as I look deeply into his eyes.

“The past is there to show you how far you’ve come. It does not have to be the map you follow to

your future."

As I say the words, I realize just how little of my own advice I've taken. Sure, I have made a plan for my future that isn't defined by my past. But I have also overlooked possibilities because of the before. Feodora has made me feel small with her words and her hands, and I have fought for years to remind myself that I'm anything but. Yet, I can't just turn those intrusive thoughts off. He doesn't need my own insecurities bringing him down. That's why I came to the dance to tell him goodbye. It's why we can never be together.

But he can be a great king. The best king this land has ever known.

"How did you turn out to be so wonderful?" he says, his voice gentle, but his eyes full of fire as he looks at me. "There really isn't anyone like you, Mira."

My hands jerk away from his face, my heart in my throat. This isn't possible. He can't know. He can't. But as I stare at him, I see the emotion in his eyes and the small smile curling up his lips.

He does know. Somehow, he does.

MIRA

I JUMP TO MY FEET, TAKING A STEP BACK, AND HE FOLLOWS MORE SLOWLY. WE STAND THERE, JUST staring at each other. I have no words for him. I want to apologize for the deception or maybe try to explain how it was possible. But I can't figure out what to say.

"You really thought I didn't know?" Luca is the one to break the silence. "Well, I didn't. Not at first, but I figured it out."

"That's not possible," I whisper, shock still running through my body. I shift on my heels to look under my skirt hem. My shoes are still on, and it's not yet midnight. I should be fine. I should be safe. Yet, I'm not.

"I have to go. I'm sorry, Your Royal Highness, I have to—"

Twisting around, I'm ready to flee, but he's there, blocking my path.

"Don't make this any harder than it needs to be," I say, refusing to meet his gaze.

"Mira—"

"*Pozalusta*." I'm still speaking to the ground. I don't think I can look at him without showing all my emotions on my face. The mask I'm wearing doesn't hide much. But then I feel a breath of his fingertips on my upper arm, and I take two steps back.

"Why won't you talk to me?"

"How long? How long have you known?" I ask. I feel like such a fool. I can't process my feelings fast enough. My hands itch to grab my journal and write it all out so I can figure out what I'm supposed to do right now.

"I had my suspicions after the second dance, but I knew for sure when you stepped into the courtyard tonight."

I glance at him then, my eyes round with shock. He saw through the magic, somehow. I can't even begin to figure out how that's possible. But maybe the magic just didn't work. No, that doesn't make sense. It worked, because I wasn't immediately ambushed by my stepfamily. And Feodora looked right at me.

"I apologize for the deception. It was the only way I could come."

"I'm not mad about it." Once again, he surprises me. "You have to see how happy I am that the girl I've been falling for and the princess I've become enamored with are the same person."

My brain must be playing tricks on me because I don't think I heard him correctly. He's not saying what I think he's saying. But even if he is—no, it doesn't matter.

"The princess doesn't exist, Your Royal Highness. I'm in a borrowed dress with gifted magic."

"Still the most beautiful girl I've ever seen."

The fear of him seeing me, the real me, is nearly overwhelming. I don't think he understands that this is the fake me. Not the servant girl. I have to make him see. Somehow, I need him to see the truth. Even if it breaks me.

"You fell for the perfect version of me, the pretty dresses and the perfectly curled hair and the girl who says everything right, hoping to impress the prince. What happens when you find out I'm not that girl?" I'm breathing heavily and tears threaten to spill, but I won't let them. Not yet.

Luca steps forward, an incredulous look on his face.

"You think that's the version of you I fell for? That has nothing to do with what I feel for you!" He's angry now, and I can't tell if it's with me or himself.

"You can say that now," I say, taking a tiny step back. The pain in his eyes slams into me. "But what happens when you realize just how different our worlds are? You're the crown prince of *Zelenovo Korolevsta*. I'm a poor orphan girl who's been hiding in the shadows her whole life, just trying to survive. Our worlds…they may intersect, but they will never merge."

Now I am crying, and there are tears in his eyes too. He's proven me wrong every step of the way, but I can't get over who we are. Who we are in this world, in this kingdom. This is the part where I have to leave, and he has to stay.

"Tell me something, Mira. What makes it all matter?"

My eyebrows pull together as one, my eyes dropping down before they're on him again.

"What makes it all matter?" he repeats, closing some of the distance between us. "I say it's you and it's me. You say it's not possible, that our worlds are too different, but I refuse to let some little thing like our birth status be the reason we walk away. Because I'd rather have nothing to do with my name as long as I have you. You are enough for me. Am I enough for you?"

I take a deep breath, letting his words settle over me. It's everything I want to hear. For just a second, I picture the life we could have, the future that could be ours. And then I push it all away.

I cannot take him away from his world. This kingdom needs him, more than he thinks he wants me.

I close the space between us, reaching for him with my hand as it falls on his cheek. He leans into it, his body vibrating with the same desire that courses through mine.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. His eyes fly open, focusing on me. "One day, you'll understand that I'm breaking my heart to heal yours. You are going to be a great king someday, Luca. Your people will love you for the kindness and true care that you show them because that is who you are, to your very core. Don't ever forget that."

Tears are streaming down my face now. It takes all my self-control not to step forward and kiss him, just once. Another memory for me to take with me. But I don't. He looks stricken by my words, and I can't be the one to pull him back together. Just then, the clock strikes, and I know it's time to go.

Without another word, I turn and flee into the castle.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-ONE

LUCA

Just like that, she leaves. Before her words even settle over me, she's gone. My body feels like it doesn't belong to me, like I've been pulled out of it, and I'm watching myself stand dumbfounded in the middle of my room.

I want to chase after her, but instead, my feet carry me out of my room and back down to the courtyard. I'm still in the hallway when, suddenly, my parents are in front of me.

"What is it, Luca?" Mama is instantly beside me, reaching for my face so she can study it. "Are you hurt?"

"Only on the inside," I mumble. Mama takes my hand, pulling me away from the prying eyes of the public with Papa in tow.

"Tell us what happened."

"How did you know?" I look at her as she continues to study me.

"A mother always knows. Now tell me."

I think I'm going to cry again, but I don't. That's something I only do in front of Mira, apparently.

"Mira happened. She—the mysterious princess and she are one. And she—she didn't want me."

My parents are quiet for a moment. If I wasn't watching them, I would have missed the look they exchanged. They always do that, talk without speaking.

"Where is she now?" Papa asks. I shrug.

"She ran from me. I told her how I felt, and she ran. Why would she do that?" I understand I probably sound like a child right now, but I can't help it. If anyone can make sense of it, my parents can. They're the smartest people I know.

"She must have a reason," Papa says.

"Not a logical one," I reply, sounding pouty even to my own ears. I have got to get a grip on myself.

"It's difficult to be logical when emotions are involved," Mama says. I glance up at her in surprise. "Both of you are overwhelmed, and Mira…" Mama pauses, and I stand up a little straighter. Mama continues. "She hasn't had the best luck in her life. I'm sure she's scared and I'm sure there are other factors you don't understand. Just talk to her."

"And if she doesn't want to talk to me?"

"Then you'll have your answer."

I pause before I ask my next question.

"Can you give someone your heart without them accepting it?"

Mama gives me a kind smile, running a hand over my hair and face, like she used to do when I was still a young boy.

"I think you already know the answer to that. The real question is what you're going to do about it."

It seems foolish to me, her arguments for why we can't be together. But they're not foolish to her. They feel like the end of the world, and I want to understand. I want to understand every part of her. If she gives me the chance to do so, that is. But my parents are right, I have to try. I can't just leave it with her having the last word. I'm ready to fight for us, and I have to prove that to her.

Moving forward, I hug my parents at the same time, breathing in deeply. They're the best people I know. I truly would be lost without them. But now I have to make my own decisions, and there's no time to waste. I already wasted so much by allowing myself to wallow. Truly, I should be embarrassed of myself. But mostly, I'm determined.

If Mira doesn't want me, once and for all, I'll let her go. I don't think I'll ever recover from her, but I will honor her decision. But I have to try one last time.

I drop a kiss on my mama's cheek and then I race out of there.

The last direction I saw her flee was toward the garden that borders the forest. That's my first stop. When I reach it, no one is there, but a flash of gold catches my eye. I move toward it and realize what caught my attention.

A single golden slipper.

MIRA

I RACE OUT OF THERE, AS FAST AS MY FEET CAN CARRY ME. WHEN I STUMBLE, I CATCH MYSELF ON MY hands and knees. Tears stream down my face as I try to catch my breath. I push back up to my feet, and my body has gone numb. Today was the end. I can never return and be myself here, not without embarrassing myself or bringing shame to my parents' name. It doesn't matter anyway, because I'll be gone before the dust settles. I'll go to the queen tomorrow and ask for passage out.

Pushing at the space on the wall like I saw the cat do, I finally get it open, and then I'm in the woods. With only my pain for a companion, I stumble through the *Volshebnii Les*, wiping at my face every now and then. I made such a fool of myself. It was dumb of me to think a prince could be with someone like me. Even as kind a prince as Luca.

When the house finally comes into view, I breathe out a sigh of relief. I'll get myself cleaned up and then I'll take out my journal and make a list of everything I have to do. And yes, I'll write about the dance and the way his hands felt around me. Because no matter what, I still want to remember his green eyes forever. I'm still wearing my dress, I'll need to return it, but I lost the mask somewhere, and it's now another thing that's gone forever.

Stepping inside the house, I realize too late that the lanterns are burning. A rough hand grabs my upper arm, yanking me forward and down. I fall to the floor, barely catching myself on my hands. I turn to find an enraged Feodora standing over me.

"I told you, Mother." Galina's smug voice comes from the left. I glance over to see her standing there with her head held high. She's staring down at me, her sister beside her. It's past midnight and

there is no magic to shield me now. “I told you she was up to no good.”

Ah, so Galina has finally shown her true colors. I knew they were right below the surface, and here we are.

“What do you think you’re doing, sneaking to the ball like that? The disgrace. A servant dancing with the prince.” Feodora’s words are filled with rage and jealousy. She leans down over me before yanking the pin out of my hair. It sends my hair tumbling, and my scalp stinging.

“You are done here, do you understand me? I have a debt to pay, and I am ready to pay it in full. On your feet.”

I do as she says, only because I can’t handle being on the floor in front of her. But as soon as I’m on my feet, a slap across my cheek makes my ears ring.

“That’s for your disobedience.” Feodora’s words are full of venom. She raises her hand again, but this time, I catch it before it can hit me. Her eyes grow big before they narrow. “How dare you?”

“How dare you lay your hand on me?” I reply, raising my head. It’s way past time that I start standing up for myself.

“You think I don’t have power over you? You have no idea,” Feodora nearly spits, which is very unladylike for her. It tells me just how crazed she is at the moment.

My face stings, but I’m not backing down. I’m leaving. This is it. The queen said she’d get me out so I’m getting out. I don’t have to deal with this any longer.

Suddenly, Agrippina and Galina are there, grabbing me by the wrists. They’re not strong, but they take me by surprise. Before I can move or pull free, a weight settles around my neck with a click. I stare at Feodora in horror as I follow the chain to her hand. A metal collar fits snugly around my throat. If I tense even a little, it starts to bite into my skin.

“What are you doing?” I ask as the girls drop my arms and step back, looking smug.

“Aren’t you paying attention? Paying a debt. Now, let’s go.”

She doesn’t wait for me to start moving before she walks toward the front door. If I have any chance of getting out of here, I have no choice but to follow her. The girls trail behind us, snickering. My heart feels like it’s going to beat out of my chest, fear gripping every part of me. Feodora has always been cruel. But this? This is another level. She has never chained me before. Every reason I’ve been afraid to stand up for myself, why I’ve put up with her abuse, comes crashing over me. It’s for this exact reason. Because she is my guardian, and she has ties to underground markets.

We don’t head toward the main road, turning toward the garden and the forest beyond it instead. My foot lands on a twig, and I yelp, realizing for the first time that I’m missing a shoe. When did that happen? Feodora tugs on the chain. This time, I stumble to my knees.

“Get up!” Galina is in my face, yelling at me. She’s always been the quieter of the two girls, the dumber one as her mother puts it. But I’ve seen cruelty in her, and now, it’s displayed plainly in front of me. I raise my head, glaring at her. Even while they treat me like an animal, I will not be broken. Somehow, I will get out of this. Galina grabs my hair— still full of purple extensions—and yanks hard. I gasp, swallowing my cry as my eyes sting.

“Galina, darling, let her get to her feet. We’re not going to be out here all night.”

The girl steps back at her mother’s words. I push myself to my feet. Agrippina is there before I’m fully on my feet, yanking my other shoe off. She takes it in her hands, admiring it with an evil smile. I open my mouth to protest but close it promptly. I have to be careful of what I say. I just hope I lost the other shoe somewhere she’ll never find it.

“Come now. We have an appointment to keep.”

Feodora pulls me behind her, and I have no choice but to follow. As we step into the forest, it

feels foreboding. I've never been afraid of it, not even with the strange horsemen and singing bird woman showing up. Not like this. But now, I feel dread settle at the bottom of my heart, weighing me down.

"After we're done here, I'll make sure to go straight to the prince with this," Agrippina says as she walks beside me, her eyes on the shoe. "He'll totally believe me when I say I'm the mysterious princess. I'll just have to make up some story about what happened to the other slipper. And dye my hair. What is that color, anyway?"

My body shudders at the thought of Agrippina anywhere near Luca, even though I know he already figured out who I was. He won't believe her, yet, maybe the magic will convince him. He was susceptible to it once. He might be again.

Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. Now I have another motivation to get out of here, so I can save not only myself but him as well. There's no way I'll allow these women anywhere near the royal family or the throne.

When the sound of horse's hooves echo in the night, I perk up immediately. The girls freeze, clearly scared, but Feodora doesn't even pause.

"Ignore it."

"But, Mother—"

"No buts. They're not here for you."

So, she knows about the horsemen. What else does she know? This woman has layers I have never seen before. She is much more cunning than I ever realized. That's my fault. I shouldn't have tried to see her as my papa did. I should've only seen her for who she's been to me.

A monster.

In the next few minutes, when I think my feet won't be able to walk any further due to all the cuts and scratches on them, we come to a clearing.

The first thing I notice is the house. It sits in the middle of the clearing with one door and one chimney, yet it's taller than a normal one room house would be. That's when Feodora moves to the side, and I see the chicken legs.

The whole of the wooden structure stands on two chicken legs. As I watch, it shifts from foot to foot before it settles into a statuesque stance again.

All hope drains out of me in a whoosh because I know who the owner of the house is.

Baba Yaga. The hag, the child eater, the sorceress of darkness who Queen Calista defeated twenty-five years ago.

She's returned.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-TWO

MIRA

There's a fire burning in front of the hut, but no sign of anyone. As we move closer, I do notice movement near the house. I nearly stumble back when I realize what it is. There are hands—dismembered hands—floating around, carrying out various chores. One is stirring a pot over the fire, another is separating pieces of something—maybe grain. I don't want to look too closely. The hands look half decayed and are not attached to anything but air.

"Eww, that's disgusting!" Agrippina exclaims. Feodora shushes her.

"Don't speak. Keep your thoughts to yourself and let me do the talking," she commands. I cannot take my eyes off the floating hands. They're grotesque, and every piece of information I have ever heard about Baba Yaga comes flooding back.

She is not a kind woman, but a powerful one. So powerful, in fact, that Skazka herself—the land on which we stand—had to rise up against her. Now the forest I love so much looks foreboding, as if it's holding onto the shadows, ready to unleash them. Every creak of a tree branch sends unpleasant shivers through my body.

Suddenly, the house moves, stretching out one chicken leg, then the other. It makes the ground beneath our feet shake. I have no idea if it can see us as there are no eyes on the wooden door or walls, but it feels like it can. It's like it's glaring at us before it, once again, settles into a statuesque stance.

"Mother, we—" Galina says, but Feodora raises her hand in a hush motion.

"What did I just say?"

"I see your girls have not learned their manners." The voice comes from all around us. It has a lower pitch, and it's nearly seductive. It's entirely different from what I expected, but more terrifying, somehow. I search the trees, trying to pinpoint the origin of the voice, when suddenly, like a curtain, they part to the right. The four of us twist in that direction. I watch as a woman appears inside a mortar, wielding a pestle.

From the stories, I expect a deformed creature, but the woman isn't. She's beautiful enough to blind. Her long dark hair flows around her and down to the ground, which she floats a few meters above. She raises her nose in the air, as if sniffing, before her dark eyes find us again.

My hand, which is thankfully not bound, curls over the hidden knife in my pocket. I know it would be useless against her, though. As usual, it offers me a sense of comfort, a physical object I can hold onto as everything around me spins into madness.

"Hello, *Vladychitsa*," Feodora calls out, bowing. The girls do the same. When I don't move,

Galina reaches over, pushing me down. I bow at the waist, my hair falling in my face. The fact that Feodora calls her mistress tells me many things, one of which is that this is where Feodora has been getting her spending money. She has to have made a bargain of sorts. I'm just not sure what she could've offered the sorceress.

As I straighten back up, I watch Baba Yaga step down from the mortar. I nearly gasp in surprise. I know her. A much younger, and frankly, prettier, version of the girl's tutor stands before me.

This doesn't make any sense. What could this ridiculously powerful witch need from the girls? Or Feodora?

"How nice of you to visit, Feodora," Baba Yaga says, making her way slowly toward us. No, toward me. Her whole attention seems to be on me, or rather, on the metal collar around my neck. "You have brought me a present."

My eyes fly to Feodora, my blood turning cold. There's no missing the way Baba Yaga's eyes light up looking at me. I'm the present. Feodora has come to hand me off for—what? I have no idea.

"We had a deal. She's all yours, and I—"

"Get a very large sum of money that will keep you and your offspring well taken care of for years," Baba Yaga finishes, not taking her eyes off me. There's a whole sea of plans in that gaze, and none of them will end well for me.

"That's it then, right? She's yours?" Feodora asks, but Baba Yaga isn't paying any attention to her anymore. She walks closer to me before circling me like a hunter circles its prey. "I asked—"

A sudden burst of wind comes out of nowhere, sweeping Feodora right off her feet and depositing her a few meters back, closer to the fire. She lands hard, and the girls race over to her immediately.

"You will speak when I tell you to," Baba Yaga says, her voice full of ice. "Now wait your turn."

Then, Baba Yaga is right in front of me, studying me with those dark eyes of hers. She sniffs once, twice, and the stories of her being able to tell by scent if there are children present are clearly not exaggerated. She pulls back, giving me a humorless smile.

"You have been promised to me, and I am ready to receive. You are of good blood and strong bones. Your body has seen work." She lists the observations with near glee. Even though I'm terrified, I refuse to let her see it.

"Better for digestion?" I say, keeping my voice firm. Baba Yaga's eyes flash, and she grins. When she does, her whole demeanor changes—just for a split second—and I see past the beautiful woman to the ugly hag underneath. It's there and gone in a flash, but it turns my fear up by a few hundred degrees. She probably did it on purpose.

"My plans for you are not so minuscule, girl. You will work for me first, and once I am satisfied, you will meet your end."

"I will not work for you!"

"Why not?" Baba Yaga cocks her head to the side. "You have done it for her all these years." She points to Feodora, who hasn't moved from her position on the ground with the girls beside her. My eyes meet those of my stepmother's, and all the years of abuse and mistreatment come flooding in all at once.

"You have never cared for me, have you?" I ask Feodora, not taking my eyes off her. She raises her chin, regality and pride in every move.

"One does not waste time caring about insignificant things." There's no malice in her words, she says them matter-of-factly, which is the biggest indication of her as a person. She truly believes that. I'm nothing but a thing to her, not even a person.

"Talk to her, girl," Baba Yaga says. She waves a hand and the collar around my neck drops off. I

glance at her in surprise, but I suppose she doesn't need something so trivial to keep me here. She can wave her hand, and I'd be on my knees like Feodora. But she wants this…confrontation. I don't understand why, but maybe she feeds off it. The ways she's looking at me tells me I might be onto something. Yet, I don't care. I want to say these things to Feodora, and now, I finally can.

"I have done nothing but try to make you see me as your stepdaughter," I begin, taking a step toward her. "I have taken care of you and your daughters, I have taken care of the house, and nothing I've ever done was enough. Did you love my father at all?"

Feodora stares at me as if I've asked the most ridiculous of questions. In the end, I really don't care what this woman thinks of me, but Papa didn't deserve this. I need to know if there's maybe at least a glimmer of someone who cared for him in Feodora.

"*Nyet*." One word, and anything I've ever thought and hoped for shatters. "He was a means to an end, just like you are. Like father, like daughter."

Tears well up in my eyes, spilling before I can hide them.

"There's no hope then," I say, defeated. Nothing was ever going to make Feodora see me as a living being, and definitely not as a daughter. It's what I knew in my heart all this time, but somehow, I still hoped that maybe I was wrong. Maybe Feodora carried some pain in her heart, some sorrow that turned her into this bitter old woman. But it's only the cruelty of her heart that made her who she is. Or whatever occupies the space where her heart should be.

There's no talking her out of giving me up to Baba Yaga either. It's a done deal. It was a done deal before we even came here. My whole body feels defeated, filled with disappointment and pain.

That's when Baba Yaga begins to laugh.

THE SOUND OF LAUGHTER ECHOES OFF THE TREES THAT SURROUND US. IT'S SO CHILLING, EVEN THE house reacts to it with a shake. Baba Yaga is in front of me once more, but this time, she doesn't hesitate to grab me by the neck, raising my head so she can study me closely.

"So much pain, so much sorrow, so much hopelessness. Maybe you should be first on my plate. But no, I have other plans for you." She sniffs me again, sending another army of unpleasant goosebumps up and down my body. I'm shaking. I can't control it, but even though I'm scared, I'm not going down without a fight. If she comes at me with anything but magic, I will fight. I refuse to take anything lying down ever again.

I can't believe I ever allowed myself to do so in the first place. I should've run away, I should've done something, instead of turning the other cheek to Feodora all these years. I thought I was being strong, but that's not the kind of strong I want to be. Then again, I was a child and she was an adult. She should have known better than to treat me so terribly.

I want to stand up for myself. I want to fight for myself. I want to be the kind of daughter Mama and Papa would be proud of. But first, I have to get myself out of here.

"Now I think it is time we had a little more fun." Baba Yaga sneers, and I can't even begin to imagine what she means. She waves her hand, and just like before, I can't see the magic, but I feel it. And this time, it's directed at me.

I drop to all fours as the wind is knocked out of me. She steps closer.

"Do not think I will let you misbehave, little girl. You are hereby bound into servitude until I

deem it good enough to put you out of your misery."

"No."

"No?"

"No." I raise my head, glaring at her even as I push myself to stand. I don't get far before I'm back on all fours. "You can keep me bound by your magic, but I will never willingly serve you."

"But you have no choice, little girl. I will mold you into the perfect spy. I know that prince of yours will take you back in the blink of an eye, and then, I will have my deserved revenge."

Everything falls into a perfect picture with those words, like rubber snapping back into place after it was stretched. She knows who I am and what I've done. How, it doesn't matter. She must have spies everywhere. She's clearly been planning something, using the tutoring position as a way to sneak around undetected. But now she knows about me, and she intends to use me to get to the royal family. To get to Queen Calista.

To Luca.

There's no way I can let that happen. I have to protect Luca from her. I have to protect the whole royal family. It's foolish to think I have any kind of power against Baba Yaga, but I won't let her win. I won't.

Before I can move, a commotion in the trees draws our attention. Then, to my utter and complete disbelief, Luca is in the clearing.

He looks fierce and determined, his hair disheveled, his dress coat discarded somewhere else. He stands in his white shirt, sleeves rolled up to the elbows, his boots muddy from the trek through the forest, but he still looks royal all the way. His eyes find me immediately, and there's a visual cue of his body exhaling at the sight of me.

A moment of relief.

My handsome, brave prince. My heart fills with all the emotions in the world, which are followed by fear. Here I'm planning on sacrificing myself to keep him safe, and he shows up right in the midst of it.

He looks genuinely happy to see me. Then, he takes in the rest of the scene. His eyes narrow and his hand reaches for the sword at his side, but he doesn't make it that far. The sword is ripped away from his body, flying into the forest. The momentum yanks him off his feet. He drops down on his back, but then he rolls over quickly and jumps to his feet again.

"Well, if it is not the little prince coming to save his damsel in distress." Baba Yaga's voice sounds more dangerous somehow. There's unrestrained glee in her voice now, and I hate the way her eyes shine, looking at Luca.

When she waves her arm again, I'm nervous as to what she'll do, but Luca and I remain as we are. Then, I hear a yell and turn to see the girls and Feodora farther away from me than before, almost near the forest line. But now, they're being restrained by the floating hands. They try to shake them off, but the hands don't budge. Holding all three women by their upper arms, the hands drag them back closer to the house.

"You cannot be leaving so soon," Baba Yaga says, as the girls continue to struggle. "The fun part is only beginning."

The hands force the girls to a sitting position on the ground, but they don't remove themselves, keeping their fingers wrapped around their arms. I can see just how revolted the girls are. I think Baba Yaga enjoys every second of it.

Glancing back at Luca, I want to go to him. I want to have magic so I can magic us out of here. Why did he have to come? Why couldn't he just let me go? He'd be safe right now.

“Now, where was I?” Baba Yaga turns back to me. “Ah, yes. I was going to use you to infiltrate the castle for me. But now, I have no use for you, little girl. Not when the princeling is here.”

Hands come out of nowhere, grabbing me as they try to drag me toward the fire. My hand goes for my hidden knife. I whip it out, stabbing one of the hands right as it tries to snatch me. Another is pulling my hair back, trying to disorient me, but I’m not going down easily.

I hear Luca scream, and his voice fuels my resolve.

He rushes for me, but Baba Yaga’s magic slams into him, sweeping him off his feet. He lands hard on his back and doesn’t move immediately. Now I’m the one screaming.

My body begins to shake, my heart beating loudly in my ears. It feels like a panic attack but on a whole new scale. The hands drop away from me as I gasp. I’m on all fours, trying to force air into my lungs, but it’s not working. My vision is tunneling. I can’t lose it like this. I can’t. Now is not the time. She’ll destroy Luca and his family if I do nothing. I can’t allow that to happen.

I raise my head with some difficulty, but I see Luca is sitting up, and his eyes are on me. He opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. It must be another Baba Yaga trick. He motions for me to breathe in with him, and somehow, I do. He keeps his gaze on mine, guiding me through my panic, just like he did at the bazaar. But now, he’s not holding back the emotion shining in his green eyes. He’s my calm inside the storm, my anchor to the here and now.

My hand curls over the necklace under my dress, the past and present merging together. My parents are the building blocks of who I am, the me right now, and Luca…he could be my future.

I refuse to allow Baba Yaga or Feodora or anyone else to take that away from me.

Then, as suddenly as the attack began, it recedes. I’m breathing steadily once again.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-THREE

MIRA

When I feel like I can focus again, I find Baba Yaga near the kettle hanging over the fire. Luca is still opposite of me, and Feodora and the girls are at my back. Somehow, I'm right in the middle of this whole thing. I can't figure out how I got here, but I have to do something.

"Do you really think Queen Calista won't know you've done something to her son?" I call out, even though I'm so scared I can barely see straight. Baba Yaga looks over at me, completely unbothered.

"Calista has grown comfortable in her power, on the throne she took from me. She has been oblivious to me for months while I've been right under her nose." Baba Yaga cackles, an ugly sound contradictory to the way she looks right now. She's so sure of herself, but I don't believe it. I've seen the way Queen Calista cares for her people, the worry in her gaze, the whispers around the castle of something brewing. She's aware, and she's getting ready. Maybe I can use that to throw Baba Yaga off balance. If she was at her full power, she would've gone after Queen Calista already. There's a reason she needed Feodora, and now Luca and me. I just can't imagine what it could be.

"I wouldn't be so sure," I say, happy to hear that my voice comes out stronger than I'm feeling. Luca looks at me like I've lost my mind, but I don't focus on him long, keeping my attention on the witch. "If you were powerful enough to take her on, you would've done it already. You're scared."

"How dare you?" Baba Yaga screams, suddenly in my face. "You know nothing of power, little girl. You know nothing of the world. My riders have watched you walk home every night, have seen the secrets you keep. I knew you would be valuable to me. Your own mother has made a bargain to trade you to me for some pieces of gold. But you are no longer needed. I am fully ready to break your bones and to cook your flesh."

My body shudders before I can try to control the response. Baba Yaga grins. The image of her blurs until I see both the hag and the beautiful woman in front of me. A part of me wants to curl up and cry, but a bigger part focuses on everything this creature can take from me. I won't stand for it.

"That woman is not my mother," I say, my eyes flashing. "And you will not touch the royal family."

This time when Baba Yaga laughs, the ground shakes around us. She's beside Luca in a flash, smacking him clear across his face before she's back to me.

"What a pretty little princeling," she coos into my face. "I will take my time eating him, piece by piece."

My chest feels like it might explode from the pressure as my eyes find Luca. He's on all fours,

breathing heavily. I'm too far away and too powerless to help him. I don't understand what game I am playing, only that maybe if I make Baba Yaga angry enough, she will use more of her magic and Queen Calista will come for us. She has to come for Luca.

That's my only goal here—to save him.

But selfishly, I want to save myself too, because I want a future. For myself and with him.

I realize what he was trying to say back at the palace, what he was trying to make me understand. Being different is what makes us people, and that means that no one is better than any other. Sure, money and privilege separate us, but we shouldn't let them. I have been the one who allowed it to do so. I let myself believe the lies that were told to me for years. I allowed Feodora to win by thinking I am less than I am.

But never again.

I will fight for myself. I will fight for Luca. Because I am enough.

I am a poor servant girl with no money and no home, but I still have a heart full of love. A love I want to share with Luca.

My eyes meet his, and tears spill down my cheeks as I will him to see what I feel inside. I was a coward. But I refuse to be one any longer.

With strength born of resilience, I push myself to my feet, stumbling toward Baba Yaga. She turns her attention to me, narrowing her eyes. I drop once again, landing hard.

"You forget your place, little girl," the woman says, her ugly spirit sneaking past the beautiful outward appearance again. I realize I'm pushing her buttons, and her magic is slipping.

"*Nyet*," I reply, pushing myself to my feet once more. "It's right here, between you and Luca."

I throw myself at her with the knife clutched in my fist. It's the surprise that gives me the upper hand. The blade goes right through her shoulder. She pushes me off with a cry of rage. The disembodied hands grab me once again. This time, they pin my arms and my legs to the dirt. Baba Yaga is on me in a flash, floating right above my body. Blood seeps from her wound as she yanks the knife out, spraying me with blood droplets.

"You will pay for your insolence," she nearly growls and then she sinks her teeth into my shoulder. I expect to feel pain. Instead, she yelps, jumping back as if she's been burned. Wild eyes meet mine as she studies me.

"What is this? Magic!" She spits, and I don't understand what she's saying right away. I don't have magic. Her eyes land on my chest, which she points to, outraged. "Where did you get that?"

I glance down and see that the necklace my mama gave me has tumbled out of the collar of my dress. The little doll lays against my chest. When I look at Baba Yaga, her eyes are trained on it.

"It was a gift," I say, not taking my eyes off the witch.

"*Blagosloveniye volshebnitsi*," Baba Yaga spits again, as if trying to get the taste of me off her tongue. "Magic of a blessing."

It doesn't make sense, but then I remember the old woman who gifted me the golden slippers, and her words to me. The necklace was a blessing given to my mama, one she passed on to me. Tears fill my eyes as I think of her protecting me, even from beyond.

"Not to worry." Baba Yaga glares at me. "I will deal with you later." She twists herself toward Luca. "Let us see if you carry a blessing with you as well."

I TRY TO FIGHT OFF THE DISEMBODIED HANDS HOLDING ME, BUT THEY KEEP ME PINNED TO THE GROUND. Tears blind me as I turn to watch Baba Yaga make her way to Luca. Suddenly, I'm lifted off the ground and deposited on my knees, arms outstretched.

"I want you to watch this," Baba Yaga says without turning around. She stops in front of Luca, who still hasn't said a word. He's trying to rise from his position on his knees, but she has hold of him. I'm helpless to do anything to help him. There has to be something.

Glancing to the side, I see that my stepfamily is still being held captive by the grotesque hands. The girls are crying, but no noise comes from them. Baba Yaga really likes silence.

But maybe it's not silence she likes. It's what could be said if people were allowed to speak. I turn back to Luca, finding his eyes on mine.

"I'm sorry," I say. Baba Yaga immediately turns to me, but she doesn't mute me. Maybe she can't because of the magic in my necklace. She narrows her eyes, but I don't stop. "I was a coward, Luca. I didn't tell you who I was because I was too afraid you'd realize I was a nobody. But that's not true, is it? Because you saw me when I was supposed to be invisible. You looked past the uniform and my position, and you trusted me with your secrets. When we get out of here, and we will, I want to share all my secrets with you."

"*Zatknis*! *Zatknis*!" Baba Yaga begins to scream, but I can't stop talking now that I've begun.

"You made me believe in magic again, Luca," I say, tears streaming down my face. "You reminded me that maybe being strong isn't just wielding a sword or having all the power or money in the world. It's being true to yourself. It's giving your emotions a place. It's giving you a chance. Us a chance. I don't know if any of this makes sense, but this is me being brave. Maybe for the first time."

Baba Yaga is suddenly in front of me, rage and hate seeping off her like steam. She screams in my face before she's back to Luca. I don't even know what she's doing until she grabs his arm and bites into it. He screams, the sound amplified by the eerie silence from before. I thrash against my restraints but can do nothing but watch.

But then something happens. Baba Yaga lets him go, stumbling back, horror on her face. There's blood on her lips. She wipes at it frantically.

"No, no, no, no," she repeats over and over. Then she glares at me. "True love. It is disgusting. It is vile. It is poison. Poison to my bones!" She's raging now, screaming into the forest. Even the hands holding me tremble. Her chicken-leg house shakes awake, taking a few steps back as the witch continues to scream.

"You came here to destroy me! You stupid, filthy tricksters! You have tried to poison me!" Her outer beauty melts away, and I can't stop the gasp that escapes me. She's rotting away, her skin missing in places and hanging limp in others. Her mouth has barely any teeth. Those that are left are yellow and stained with fresh blood. Warts cover her large nose. She has barely any hair left on her head. The stench coming off her turns my stomach.

Worst of all, there's madness in her gaze.

"You!"

At first, I think she's bellowing at me, but then I realize she's pointing at my stepfamily. They're dragged forward by the hands. Now, it's as if the volume has been turned on, and I can hear them screaming and whimpering.

"You brought me a blessing and a poison! You came to destroy me! You filthy scum, trying to poison me!" Baba Yaga screams into Feodora's face. I have never seen the woman cower, but she looks terrified now.

"No, I didn't—I couldn't—"

Baba Yaga backhands Feodora, stopping whatever protests she's trying to make. The girls are completely useless, only crying. They look pathetic, helpless. Even after everything they've done to me, I can't help but speak up.

"They didn't know. It's not their fault," I say. Baba Yaga turns her heated gaze on me, which makes me recoil.

"After everything they have done, you try to help them?" she asks. It seems like she's genuinely curious. I look at the girls and the woman who has been my caretaker in name only. Then I nod.

"They are broken people, greedy and selfish, but they did not try to trick you." I look away from them, meeting Baba Yaga's gaze once more. "They don't deserve to be punished."

"Oh, sweet child." Baba Yaga smiles, and the sight is something I will see in my nightmares for years if I get out of here. "They deserve to be burned."

The moment she says the words, Feodora and the girls ignite right where they sit. Their screams echo through the forest, and the house on the chicken legs jumps up and runs away. I can't help the tears that fall down my cheeks as I watch the people who've brought me nothing but pain burn away into ash. My mouth is open to protest, but I can't seem to push the words past my lips as the shock riddles my body.

"Don't do this," I manage, but it's no use. They're consumed entirely by fire, their screams shaking the ground I sit on. Then, it stops. There and gone, in the span of a few seconds. The last thing I see is Feodora's hate-filled gaze on me.

And then they're gone.

I gasp at the sight, almost like I can't believe it just happened.

"Well, that happened faster than I wanted it to," Baba Yaga says nonchalantly. "Come back here at once!" She screams, making me jump. I watch as the house returns back into the clearing. She walks over to it, rebuking it. I realize the hands have fallen off me at some point. Maybe she spent so much of her magic on her rage that she didn't have enough to control the hands. I don't stop to think about it too much. I crawl over to Luca, who's already moving toward me. He reaches for me just as I reach for him.

"Miraslava—"

"Why are you here, you stupid, stupid boy?" I cry as his hands land on my cheeks and mine reach for his. We cradle each other, looking over the other in desperation. I would give anything to get him out of here.

"You left a shoe behind," he says, and I'm laughing and crying all at the same time. "And me. You left me behind too."

"Never again," I whisper, holding his face in my hands. There are a million things I want to say to him, but I'm so scared that this is it. Because of my own fears and disbelief, I took this away from us. I could've stayed. I could've believed in what he was saying. But I was too wrapped up in my own head, thinking no one could ever care for someone like me, not the girl I've become since my parent's death. Yet, he saw past that. And he saw past the magical disguise.

"I'm so sorry, Luca."

"Well, what do I do with the two of you?" Baba Yaga has finished reprimanding her house and now has turned her attention to us. Automatically, I put myself in front of Luca. He wraps his arms around my waist and tries to draw me back. Baba Yaga narrows her eyes at us, a look of disgust on her face.

"Clearly, I cannot eat you two. The magic will not work on true"—she spits—"love. Shall I start with burning you in pieces or as a whole? Hmm. I think I will start with the little prince."

She doesn't wait for a reply, not that we could give her one, but shoots a stream of magic at us. I throw my body in front of it, but just as I do, Luca wraps his arms around my middle. He spins me around so his back is to the magic.

"Luca, no!" I scream, as he tucks me into his embrace. I hold onto him for all I'm worth, hoping against hope that the protective blessing I wear saves us both. When we're not immediately engulfed in flames, I curl my hands into him even more. My body hums in an unusual way. I lift my head to find Luca staring down at me. His green eyes are glowing, his hair moving in an invisible breeze and then he smiles.

"Hold on tight, Miraslava," he says, my full name sweet on his lips. At least I got to hear it once. Then a light so bright that I can't keep my eyes open envelops us. I tuck myself into Luca, letting him know with my touch just how much he means to me. His arms hold me locked against him. I gasp at the sudden wind that comes from every direction.

We stand like that for what seems like an eternity as I wait for the end to come, but then something else happens. The light recedes, and we're still standing. Slowly, I raise my head to meet Luca's gaze. He wears the most brilliant smile I have ever seen in my life.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FOUR

LUCA

My body feels like it's been torn apart, cell by cell, and then has snapped back together again. I feel light and heavy, rested and tired all at the same time. When I pull back to look at Mira, I think my whole life I've been waiting for this one moment.

"What just happened?" she whispers. I shake my head. I can't even put it into words. Slowly, I turn to look over my shoulder. Mira peeks around as well, but there's no one and nothing there. The house, Baba Yaga, the floating hands, even the kettle with the fire are all gone.

"Luca, did you—" I glance back down at her and the absolute wonder in her eyes.

"I did," I manage, still dazed by the power rushing through me.

When I found that golden slipper, I thought she was already lost to me. But still, I raced to her family's house, thanks to my mama and her knowing everything about her kingdom, including Mira's family name, only to find everyone gone. I'm not sure what made me look to the woods, but I saw pieces of her dress on the branches. I followed the clues straight to the clearing. I can't even say if what led me here was an actual path or the call coming from my own heart.

Because it's been beating for Mira for longer than I even realized.

Something snapped inside me when I thought I was going to lose her. Baba Yaga's words about true love suddenly made sense. It's why I could see past the disguise magic at the ball when no one else could. And it's why my own magic woke up when I thought this was the end for us.

Mira helped me heal and learn that my past mistakes do not define my future. I finally healed enough to do things right this time.

"How?" she asks, that look of wonder not leaving her eyes. Even in a torn dress, dirty, and with bruises forming where the disembodied hands held her, she is the most beautiful person I have ever seen. Her beauty shines from the inside out. I can't help the tears that pool in my eyes.

"I thought I was going to lose you and then I didn't think at all. I acted."

Mira's hands land on my face, wiping at the stray tear. She smiles.

"Just a foolish prince putting himself in danger, huh?" She chuckles, and I grin.

"You know me, I simply have to. It's a compulsion."

"You saved us."

"I think we saved each other."

All these words have been brewing inside me. If I don't get them out now, I don't know if I'll ever say them. Baba Yaga seems to be gone, although I don't think she's gone forever. Maybe I should wait for when we're clean and rested, but I simply don't want to wait anymore.

"Mira," I begin, taking a step back so I can find some footing before I lay it all on the line. She looks at me curiously but doesn't say anything, waiting me out. I take a deep breath.

"Sometimes the world feels like too much and my place in it too little, but when I'm near you, every possibility opens up. It's as if I didn't breathe until I met you, and now the air is nearly suffocating. I always thought love was only like a seed planted, growing slowly. But it's not. It's a flower blossoming overnight. It's the first fall of snow. It's finding magic in the most mundane of things."

"Luca, you're not making any sense," Mira says, but I think she's starting to understand. Her words echo inside my head, and I know that she has to feel the same. But I have to say it out loud anyway.

I take a step forward, my hands gripping hers tightly.

"There's a space in my life that's been empty for as long as I knew it was there. I didn't know what it was, and I didn't understand what it meant, but it was you. It was always you. Your brilliant mind and your breathtaking smile. The way you call me out on my stupidity and the way you encourage my ambition. Even the way you seem to bring out my clumsiness. You, every part of you, the past, present, and future, all wrapped together, are the woman I love. Am I still not making any sense?"

She shakes her head but doesn't speak. Maybe she just wants to hear me say it. Her eyes are unyielding as they look at me, and I read the same desire that's coursing through me there. I grin, and my body feels like it's floating.

"I love you, Miraslava Mihailavna Zolotaya. I love you like—"

"Oh, shut up and kiss me already."

My breath hitches and then I'm reaching for her. She meets me halfway, as usual. Our lips crash together in a frenzy of love and desire. Her hands get lost in my hair, as my hand spreads across her back, pulling her closer. There's no hesitation in our movements as we explore each other for the first time. Yet, it feels almost like we've been doing this our entire lives.

I can't get closer, and she seems to feel the same. When she pushes herself up, I don't hesitate to catch her, holding her up as she wraps her legs around my middle. There's something entirely pure about the way she feels in my arms. I don't think I will ever stop wanting her the way I do right now.

When rain begins to fall, I don't notice it immediately. I'm too wrapped up in the gorgeous girl in my arms. It is only when I hear a throat clearing that I pull back and realize we are no longer alone in the clearing.

My parents are here, and they brought Kot-Bayun.

MIRA

WE'RE BACK AT MY HOUSE—MINE AND ONLY MINE NOW. I'M NOT SURE HOW TO FEEL ABOUT THAT. How to feel about seeing my stepfamily burn. I never liked them, but I never wanted them to be murdered either. I have a lot to process. But that's for later. The queen has a million questions, and I have just as many. My body continues to shake as I try to come to terms with my new reality. I've lost everything, and yet I've gained so much more.

Luca sits beside me, one of my hands clasped in both of his. I use him as an anchor.

When they showed up in the clearing, both of his parents were ready for battle. But one look at us, and they ushered us into the house, making sure we were okay before asking any questions. Kot-Bayun, who still makes me a bit nervous, sniffed us. Then he disappeared into the woods. He's probably looking for any trace of Baba Yaga and her magic. Luca and I cleaned up the best we could, I changed out of my dress into more comfortable and warm attire, and then settled in the kitchen. This has always been a safe place for me, and it shocks me when the queen herself walks over to the teapot and pours us each a cup of tea.

I take it gratefully before I start at the beginning. I go over everything that has happened to me since I started working at the palace, the weird experiences in the woods, the horsemen, the golden slippers. Queen Calista listens without interruption, her gaze on me.

"I didn't know any of this had anything to do with Baba Yaga, or how my…family was involved." The guilt is heavy because a part of me feels like I'm responsible.

"It's not your fault, Mira," Queen Calista says, giving me a kind smile before she stands and begins to pace the small length of the kitchen. "The three horsemen, they're the three harbingers of the day—morning, afternoon, and night. They come before Baba Yaga as an omen, even though they're not her harbingers. They're just a sign of her coming, of magic returning to *Volshebnii Les*. They patrol her woods. They give her an advantage," she explains, giving me another smile. "For years, I've been afraid she'd be back, and she's been under my nose this whole time."

"I don't believe that's true, Cali." King Brendan steps up, putting a hand on her shoulder. She turns to him immediately.

"What do you mean?"

"I think she only returned recently, maybe even in preparation for the celebration. I think she knew that her best bet getting to you would be with all these people here. If she has spies, maybe they traveled here as well. Skazka is brimming with magic right now. Maybe she's been waiting just for this."

Queen Calista ponders that, nodding slowly.

"It makes sense. She likes the theatrics of playing a part." She turns to me, explaining. The fact that she keeps including me in this conversation makes me feel all kinds of things, and I'm afraid I'll cry again. "Many don't know this, but Baba Yaga and I were almost friends once. She was the advisor to the queen before me. She was going to take the throne for herself, but then I stepped up and pledged my allegiance to the land of Skazka. The land chose me, something that hasn't happened for generations. Baba Yaga took that blow personally. For years, there have been rumors of her powers returning, of her casting curses on royals and their families all across this realm. She wears many faces, and we never seem to catch her."

There's a sense of defeat in Queen Calista as she sighs. When her husband reaches for her, she leans into him automatically. The sight shocks me in a way. I have seen them together before, of course, but I guess a part of me never realized that even this strong, resilient woman could be soft for her man. It makes me smile. When I glance at Luca, it's like he knows what I'm thinking. He gives my hand a soft squeeze.

"What do you think my magic did to her?" Luca asks his parents. His mama glances at him from where she's leaning against her husband.

"I think it cleansed the space, so to speak. Something similar happened to me when I first discovered the extent of my powers. It's not that you destroyed her. It's that you protected the ground around you, pushing her away. I may be wrong, of course." She chuckles. "But that's what it felt like

in that clearing."

He nods, and this time, I'm the one giving his hand a gentle squeeze. He saved us. He came into his powers when it mattered most and saved us. I'm so proud of him.

"I'm sorry you were caught up in this," King Brendan says to me. I shake my head.

"I'm not sorry." My words make all three pairs of eyes look to me in wonder. "I think I was supposed to be here for this. I don't know if that sounds prideful or not, but I don't regret playing a part in it. Even after everything I've been through, I don't regret any of it. But I am sorry for dragging Luca into this."

Queen Calista and King Brendan both give me a wide grin, glancing over at their son.

"Pretty sure he did that all on his own," King Brendan says. I look over to see Luca shrug.

"And I'd do it again."

I bump his shoulder with mine as he gives my hand another squeeze.

"What I'd really like to know is where this old woman who gave you the shoes went," Queen Calista says, after taking a sip of her tea. "I would like to have a word or two with her."

"I have no idea. She only showed up to give me the shoes. And I guess this." I tug the necklace I've worn for as long as I remember. "She gave this as a gift to my mama, who in turn gave it to me."

"A blessing," Queen Calista says, walking over to take a closer look, but she doesn't reach for it. "These are rare, Mira. They're the purest gift a good *volshebnitsya* can give you, and your mother must've done something very right to receive it."

Tears come uninvited but not unwelcome as I think of my parents. I think they would be proud of me, for standing up for what I believe, for finally standing up for myself. This isn't over for me. I understand I will have to work through much of this trauma. I'll need help, and I will ask for it. For the first time, I'm not afraid to ask for help.

Glancing up, I find Luca's eyes on me. I see a promise in them—a promise that says we'll get through this together. There are so many ways things could've gone down in that clearing, but the fact is that we saved each other. I intend for us to do that for as long as we can.

It's a little funny to think how bad events can have beautiful outcomes. Everything that I've been through in my life has led me to this moment. Through heartache and loss, through abuse and hopelessness, I didn't break. That's something to be proud of. But mostly, to be thankful for.

"What do we do now?" I ask the room, because I know this is only the beginning. The queen and king already seem to accept me, and I realize, it's only my own warped thinking that made me think they wouldn't. There are so many possibilities opening up in front of me, ones I never even thought would be options.

"Now, we live our lives," Luca replies, grinning. "Together." I can't help but grin in return. I would kiss him if his parents weren't staring at us. I look up at them, and they're grinning like fools.

"He's so sappy," King Brendan comments.

"He gets that from you," Queen Calista replies.

CHAPTER

THIRTY-FIVE

LUCA

As much as I would like to take Mira into my arms and hold her close, there's something I have to do first. I drop a quick kiss to her forehead and then I face my parents. Mama specifically, because now that my magic has awakened, I can feel her more fully. She's worried, and she's ready to go to war.

"I want to say something," I begin, looking from one parent to the other. "Mama, you're not alone in this," I say. She's always been really good at taking everything upon her own shoulders. Papa has a unique way of making sure she understands she doesn't have to, but I feel like I must say it as well. "You have raised me to be a kind and strong ruler, and when the time comes, I will be so. My magic has awakened now." I glance over to Mira, who gives me a brilliant smile. "That makes two very powerful *volshebnits* in one kingdom. Baba Yaga may be regaining her powers, but she also lost a lot of those today. I don't think we can get rid of her forever. She is connected to this land, born of it, just like we are. Skazka must have balance, and therefore, I believe she will always be in our midst, but Mama, we will always be ready to protect what's ours."

There are tears in her eyes as she reaches for me. I hold onto her like I'm a little boy again, the fear and worry of the past few hours draining out of me.

"Your magic, Luca. I am so proud of you." She pulls back, giving me a big smile. "I've always been, but the fact that it came from your heart…it makes your mama very proud." She hugs me again.

Papa steps up and hugs both of us at once, and we're only standing like that for a moment before all three of us realize it at the same time. I step back and watch as Mama smiles. Then we turn and reach out a hand to Mira.

She looks at us in confusion, as if she can't fathom why we would do such a thing. I step closer, pulling her to her feet.

"You're part of this family now, Miraslava. You should be in on the group hugs." I grin, and she shakes her head.

"No, that seems like a—"

"Like exactly what we all need," Papa says, and then wraps his arms around Mama's shoulders and mine, while I pull Mira in and Mama wraps her arm around her. We stand like that, holding onto each other, and to the future that is vast in front of us, and I feel like the luckiest man alive.

When we pull back, it's as if we all feel better somehow. We have arrived exactly where we need to be. But even with my reassurances, I can tell Mama wants to go out into the woods herself.

"You can go. We'll be okay," I say to her. She studies me carefully before coming to a decision.

She drops a kiss to my cheek and then does the same to Mira. After that, she and Papa leave.

They're both warriors, something that has not diminished after being the monarchs for so long. I would never want it to. When I was younger, they stayed close to me, but now, I can take care of the kingdom if they're away. That's something I will make sure to mention to them.

For now though, I turn to the girl beside me.

"How are you feeling?" I ask. She glances up at me in surprise.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?"

I take her hand, leading her back to the fire. I don't miss the makeshift bed beside it or the stacked blankets on the side. This was her home, but she lived like a nobody within these walls. The anger I feel toward her family is sudden and blinding. Mira's hand squeezes mine, as if she can tell the trajectory of my thoughts. I focus my attention on her.

"Don't do that. Don't go back when we're moving forward," she says. I understand what she's trying to tell me.

Both of us have a lot of baggage to carry, but only if we choose to. It's also up to us to set it aside and look for new adventures. There'll be plenty more to carry in the future, if she'll have one with me.

"Are you okay?" she asks, breaking through my thoughts. Her free hand reaches up to push some of the hair that's fallen into my face. I desperately want her to never stop touching me.

"I am. I think I'm finally coming down."

"I know what you mean. That was intense." She reaches for her necklace, something I realize she's done before, except it's always been through her clothing. Now she pulls it out, holding onto it with a little smile.

"I wish I could've met them," I say, not sure if that's the right thing to say. She meets my eyes, and I realize it is.

"They would've loved you," she says. "I think they do, wherever they are." Her eyes grow distant for a moment before she turns back to me, angling her body. She's about to say something serious. I can tell by her expression, and I'm slightly nervous. But then, I don't have to be. We're working through a lot here, and we both need to talk it out. That's something I hope we never stop doing.

"You're really not upset about my deception? I didn't mean to lead you on or make you think I was a princess."

"No, Mira, I'm not upset. I'm glad." I lean down so our eyes are on the same level. I want her to see just how much I mean what I'm about to say. "I started falling for you way before I realized you and the princess were one. Finding out that the confusion I felt when I was around her was just my own heart trying to see past the magic was a relief. I was pulled toward her because she was you."

She mulls that over, and I can tell something is still bothering her. But I don't push, giving her the space to figure it out on her own.

"It doesn't bother you that I'm not of noble blood? I know that as a ruler, you have to keep your bloodline pure. And I'm not saying I think we're going to start having children right now. I'm way too young to think about that. Not that I wouldn't want to, but I mean—please stop me." She drops her face into her hands, and I can't help but chuckle. Gently, I pry her hands away from her face, noticing a faint blush staining her cheeks. I've never seen anything more precious.

"You are more than enough, Miraslava. Don't you ever doubt that. I'm not sure why I'm reminding you of something you already know," I say, raising my eyebrows at her. She chuckles.

"You're right. I do know I'm enough. I came to terms with a lot of things about myself in that clearing." She sighs, her eyes distant again for a moment before she turns back to me. "But I think I

still have a lot to work through before I feel solid enough in who I am, without years of doubt and trauma creeping in."

"I understand." Now I think about the aspects of my life I'll need to work through to be solid, as she put it. "But I'm here to help you and support you in any way you need."

She closes the distance between us suddenly, wrapping her arms around my neck and tugging herself closer. I lift her right off the bench and into my lap, wrapping my own arms around her.

"I was so scared," she mumbles against my neck. "I thought I would lose you before I even had you."

My heart clutches at the thought of her not in my life. I never want to experience that fear again. I tug her even closer, giving myself over to this one fierce hug.

"You're never going to lose me, Mira. I'm yours."

The words are out, and I mean every one, the ones I said in the clearing and the ones I'm saying now. It doesn't matter that we've known each other for a short time. We're twin flames, two pieces of a whole. She's the part of me that's been missing. As she clings to me, I know I will never want to let her go, and I don't plan to.

"You know, I'm never going to hear the end of this," she says, pulling back to look at me.

"What do you mean?"

"Oksana, my best friend and the person who brought me to the castle in the first place when your mama hired her to bake for the celebration. She made me take those shoes and go to the dance. There's no way I would've gone without her help. Well, and without those shoes."

My lips curl up in a grin. I make a mental note to reward her friend generously. I'll buy all the bread in her shop if I have to. I tuck a stray hair behind Mira's ear, watching her eyes light up at the small contact. I think she likes to be touched as much as I like touching her.

"I never thought I'd say this, but I am very grateful for those golden slippers." She outright laughs, and I want to hear that sound for the rest of my life. "Speaking of which—"

She looks at me curiously. I stand with her still in my arms and walk over to the table. When I came to look for her, I brought it with me, and I left it behind when I raced into the forest. But there it is, the forgotten golden slipper. She gasps, and I set her at the edge of the table, reaching for it.

"May I?" I ask, suddenly nervous. She looks at me curiously, but then realization dawns, and she nods. She lifts her dress just a bit, exposing her delicate foot. I tug the boot off before I kneel and place the slipper back on. It's a perfect fit.

Suddenly, she gasps, raising her other foot. We watch as the other slipper materializes out of thin air just like that, back where it belongs.

"Wow," I say, looking up at her as she grins down at the shoes. She's still her, my Mira, no magical cloaking to be seen.

"How do I look?" she asks. I stand, placing my hands on either side of her on the table as I lean forward.

"Like a princess. My princess," I reply before I catch her in another soul-fulfilling kiss.

EPILOGUE

MIRA

"When you told me we were going somewhere fun for an excursion, I didn't think we'd be exercising," I grumble. Luca pulls out a sword, handing it to me.

"You're the one who told me you wanted to sharpen up your sword-fighting skills," Luca replies as he takes his own sword out. He obviously prepared for this because the weapons were here when we arrived.

We're in the garden behind my house, a place Luca and I have been spending a lot of time in as we replant and prune the place to bring it to its former glory. It's been a season and a half since I was in these woods with him fighting for our lives, and they've been the best seasons of my life.

Baba Yaga hasn't reappeared, but Queen Calista and King Brendan did go traveling, meeting up with the captain of her guard halfway through and visiting various kingdoms and the towns in between.

We boarded up the house for the winter, and I stayed at the castle with Luca while they were gone. Being in love with a prince doesn't really change much about my life because he understands that I need my own space. He hasn't pushed the conversation regarding me going to the human realm, and I haven't brought it up, except that first time, to tell him I was thinking about it.

I've been helping Oksana at the bakery a lot, considering her business exploded since the celebration. She's been spending time with Yura, so she needs the help. I owe her so much. I don't think I'll ever fully repay her.

Now that spring is here, and Luca and I are back at my family's home, I feel like maybe I can start clueing him in on my plans a little more. He's been giving me my space to figure out what I want out of life, and the fact is, I want him. That will never change, but my goals have. Not because of him, particularly, but because I have real options now. I don't have to run to make them come true.

"Come on, plant your feet, or you'll be on the ground before you know it." Luca's voice pulls me back from my musings.

"What if that's where I want to be?" I ask, giving him a coy smile. His mouth opens and shuts, then his gaze darkens. He doesn't hesitate to stalk over to me. He grabs me around the waist, tugging me flush against him, and I fall into his embrace without hesitation. His lips catch mine in a soul-scorching kiss. Even after half a year, I still can't get enough of him.

Maybe it's time I put him out of his misery.

"I have something to tell you," I whisper against his lips. He smiles, stealing another kiss. "I'm serious."

"So am I." He gives me another kiss, this one quicker but no less passionate. I place my hands on his cheeks, pushing back from him, but he doesn't let go of me.

"Are you listening?"

"Always."

That is true. We've had a lot of trauma to work through, many nightmare-filled nights where he held me while I sobbed. It's crazy to think that a part of me grieves the loss of Feodora, but I've also learned that's a trauma response. Survivor's guilt, but also something deeper that comes with abuse. I'm also learning that feeling sadness for my stepfamily keeps my heart soft, and that's something that they couldn't take away from me, even after all these years. That makes me proud of myself, something I remind myself to be more and more.

His parents have been helping me deal with a lot of it as well. They've had quite a bit of experience with trauma and had to overcome much. They have resources and people I can talk to, if I can't talk to them or Luca, and through it all, I'm finding myself.

Maybe for the first time.

Luca has been working through his demons as well, and we've come so far. It's time to go farther.

"So, I've been thinking," I begin.

"Should I be scared?"

"If you keep interrupting me, then yes."

He chuckles but wisely closes his mouth. I grin before placing a quick kiss on his mouth.

"I've been thinking," I start again. "That it's time for me to take the next step."

His eyes flash immediately, but then settle into his prince-like mask. I place another kiss on him, this time on his left cheek.

"We've been talking about the future, but not really." I kiss him again on his right cheek. "And I know my plan has been to go to the human realm." Now I kiss his nose. "I think it's time my dream is realized." I place one last kiss on his forehead. He exhales, as if steeling himself for what he has to say.

"You know I will support you in anything you decide," he whispers, his eyes on me. I watch him for a moment because I know he means it. If I decided to leave right now, he'd take me to the portal himself. I place another kiss on his forehead before I pull back and look him in the eye.

"Good, because I need help finding a good location for my flower shop. I don't want anything big, just something that can be open when it's convenient for us. And of course, I would love for you to help. I want—" I don't finish as his mouth crushes over mine, and I'm lost in him all over again. He lifts me up, and I wrap my legs around him as my arms wind around his shoulders and into his hair. This has quickly become my favorite way to kiss him, and he never hesitates to give me what I want.

"I thought you were—"

"What? Leaving you? Never, my darling prince. You're stuck with me. But I do want to work. It's part of me, of who I am. Just on my terms, not someone else's."

"Absolutely. Done."

He goes to kiss me again, but a noise catches our attention. Kot-Bayun pushes through the trees, giving us a bored glance before he stretches.

"He really likes you," Luca says, and I grin. It's true. Kot-Bayun and I have become something near friends. I'm still a little terrified of him, but I think he enjoys that. Maybe a little too much. I grin at him, but I don't leave Luca's embrace.

"And I guess my parents are back if he's here."

They've been due back any day, and I'm excited to see them. They've become the family I've

been craving for so long.

I have no idea what will happen next, but I know that I have finally found my place in the world, and it just may be in Luca's arms.

"I love you, Luca." I lean over, whispering the words into his ear.

"I love you back, Miraslava," he replies before he catches me in another kiss. Spring rain begins to fall around us, and we look up into the sky. Then our eyes meet again and we're grinning. He sets me on the ground, slowly, carefully, and then he reaches for my hand.

"May I?" he asks.

"Always." I echo his earlier promise. He pulls me against him, one hand on my waist, the other extended as he spins us into a dance. There's no music, but it's as if we hear the same melody coming from within our hearts, and it moves us in a perfect rhythm. As Kot-Bayun watches and the rain falls, Luca spins me into a twirl before I come back in for a dip.

"Shall we dance like this for the rest of our lives?" Luca murmurs.

"We shall," I reply.

Miraslava and Luca's story isn't quite over yet. Read the exclusive The Royal Engagement epilogue when you subscribe to my newsletter: Start reading here!

Thank you so much for reading! The next book in the Skazka Fairy Tales series is a Snow White retelling that follows the arranged marriage of the princess of *Korolevstvo Tsvetov*.

Stay tuned for The Poisoned Princess releasing 2023!

GLOSSARY OF RUSSIAN WORDS AND PHRASES:

Matreshka - Russian nesting doll

Sarafan - long jumper dress

benzin - gasoline

rubashka - shirt

Zaichik - bunny - term of endearment

Skazka - fairytale - also, the name of the land of fairytales in this instance

Ruble - equivalent to American dollar

kopeika - equivalent to American cents

Znaniye - knowledge - understanding

Divan - a couch

Tetia - aunt, term of respect

moya dorogaya - my dear

devochka - young girl

Spasibo - thank you

synok - son (dear son)

Nyet - no

Da - yes

milaya moya - my sweet

kaftan - coat

malchik - boy

Isveni menya - forgive me

moi milii malish - my sweet little boy

Dobrey vecher - good evening

Dobroe utro - good morning

Moya krasavitsya - my beauty

lisitchka - little fox

pchelka - bee

berezka - white beach tree

Pozalusta - please and you're welcome (depending on context)

volshebnikov - Sorcerer - magician

Vladychitsa - mistress (of evil)

Blagosloveniye - a blessing

Zatknis - shut up!

KINGDOMS OF SKAZKA

Zelonoye Korolevstvo - Green Kingdom - Luca & Mira's kingdom

Volkovskoye Korolevstvo - Kingdom of the Wolf

Holodnoye Tsarstvo - Cold Kingdom

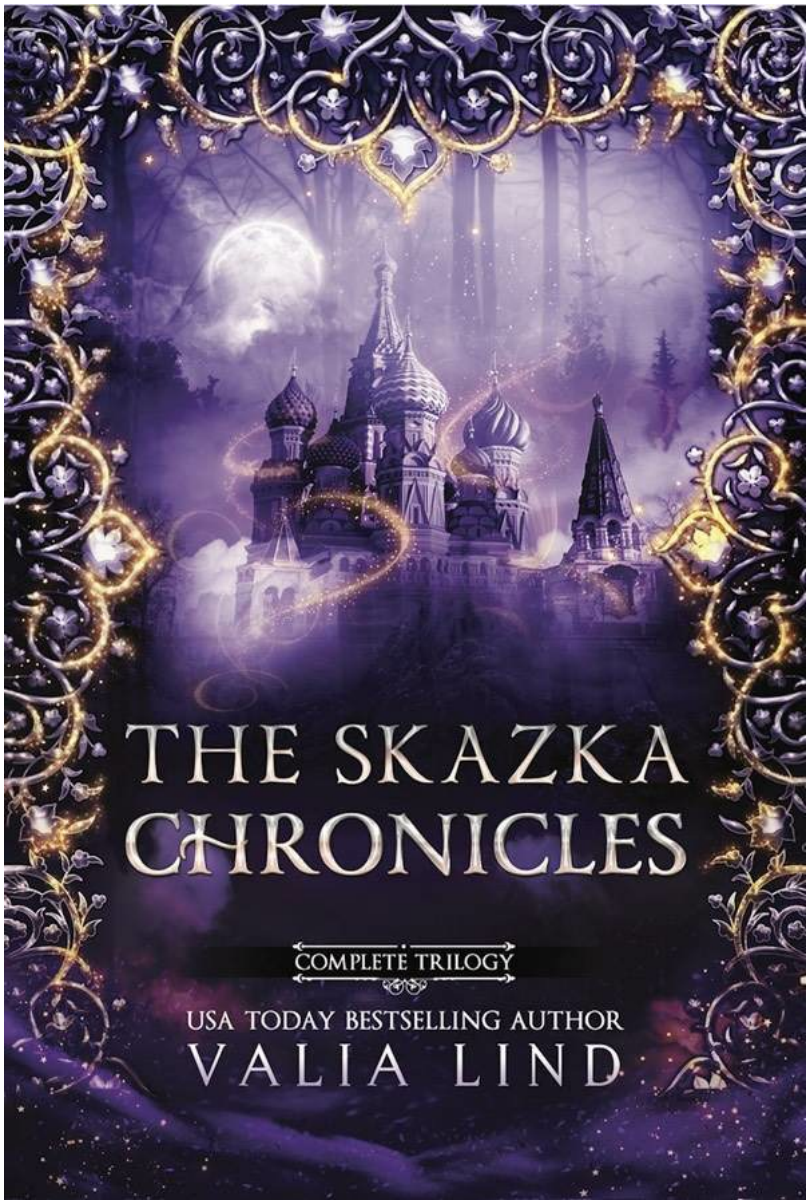
Korolevstvo Tsvetov - Kingdom of Flowers

Oceniye Tsarstvo - Autumn Kingdom

Vodnoye Tsarstvo - Kingdom of Water

What more from the land of Skazka?

Discover how Calista became the Queen of Zelenovo Korolevstva and learn more about the land of Russian fairytales in The Skazka Chronicles trilogy.



DON'T MISS THE BEAUTY AND THE BEAST RETELLING!

The Scarlet Rose is the retelling of the traditional Russian fairytale, featuring King Gavriil and Lady Nikita!

Read their story now!

Note from the Author

Thank you for reading my book! If you have enjoyed it, please consider leaving a review. Reviews are like gold to authors and are a huge help!

They help authors get more visibility, and help readers make a decision!

And, if you'd like to stay up to date with all of my shenanigans, sign up for my newsletter today and receive a free prequel novella!

CLICK HERE TO SIGN UP!

Thank you!

About the Author

USA Today bestselling author. Photographer. Artist. Born and raised in St. Petersburg, Russia, Valia Lind has always had a love for the written word. She wrote her first published book on the bathroom floor of her dormitory, while procrastinating to study for her college classes. Upon graduation, she has moved her writing to more respectable places, and has found her voice in Young Adult and cozy mysteries.

Sign up to receive updates, behind the scenes, & more!
CLICK HERE

Also by Valia Lind

The Skazka Fairy Tales

The Scarlet Rose (A Beauty and the Beast Retelling)

The Golden Slipper (A Cinderella Retelling)

The Poisoned Princess (A Snow White Retelling) - coming 2023!

The White Wolf Saga

Shared Dreams - FREE prequel

Moonlight Mate (#1)

Wolf Untamed (#2) - coming 2022!

Thunderbird Academy

The Complete trilogy Boxset

Of Water and Moonlight (Thunderbird Academy, #1)

Of Destiny and Illusions (Thunderbird Academy, #2)

Of Storms and Triumphs (Thunderbird Academy, #3)

Fae Chronicles

The Complete trilogy Boxset

Shadow of the Fae (#1)

Blood of the Fae (#2)

Revenge of the Fae (#3)

Hawthorne Chronicles

The Complete Season One Box Set

Guardian Witch (Hawthorne Chronicles, #1)

Witch's Fire (Hawthorne Chronicles, #2)

Witch's Heart (Hawthorne Chronicles, #3)

Tempest Witch (Hawthorne Chronicles, #4)

The Skazka Chronicles

Hardcover Omnibus - 4 books in one

Remembering Majyk (The Skazka Chronicles, #1)

Majyk Reborn (The Skazka Chronicles, #2)

The Faithful Soldier (The Skazka Chronicles, #2.5)

Majyk Reclaimed (The Skazka Chronicles, #3)

Crooked Windows Inn Cozy Mysteries

Books 1-3 Boxset

Once Upon a Witch #1

Two Can Witch the Game #2

Witch's First Zombie - FREE short story

Third Witch's the Charm #3

Witches Four the Win #4 - coming Spring 2022!

Blackwood Supernatural Prison Series

Witch Condemned (#1)

Witch Unchained (#2)

Witch Awakened (#3)

Witch Ascendant (#4)

Havenwood Falls (PNR standalone)

Predestined

The Titanium Trilogy

Pieces of Revenge (Titanium, #1)

Scarred by Vengeance (Titanium, #2)

Ruined in Retribution (Titanium, #3)

Complete Box Set

Falling Duology - YA contemporary romance

Falling by Design

Edge of Falling